

# ‘This is where we started’: See latest plans for Irish immigrant heritage site at Irishtown Bend Park



Planners unveil vision for Irish immigrant history site at Irishtown Bend Park.

CLEVELAND, Ohio — [Irishtown Bend](#), a long-vacant hillside overlooking the Cuyahoga River and the downtown skyline, is named for a bustling 19th-century Irish immigrant community that seems to have vanished without a trace.

By 2027, however, a 5-acre heritage site could rise over the buried archaeological remains of a once crowded riverside neighborhood. Newcomers driven there by the Irish famine of 1845-52 energized Cleveland's industrial heyday through sweat, ingenuity and hard physical labor.

The heritage project is part of the latest plans for a new, \$40 million, 25-acre park on a sloping riverbank east of West 25th Street between the Detroit Superior Bridge and Columbus Road.

The park will be built after the Port of Cleveland finishes a \$60 million project now underway to stabilize the hillside and prevent the possibility of a landslide that could block river shipping.

The nonprofits LAND Studio and Ohio City Inc., in collaboration with Irish American heritage groups and the Irish American Archives Society, released the latest designs for the Irishtown historic site exclusively to [cleveland.com](#) and The Plain Dealer.

The unveiling is timed to coincide with St. Patrick's Day 2024. (This year's St. Patrick's Day parade is scheduled to begin Sunday at 2:04 p.m. at Superior Avenue and East 18th Street. For details, check the parade website at [stpatricksdayscleveland.com/](#).)

Plans for the Irishtown Bend site will be posted on the project's website at [irishtownbendpark.org](#) and shared in upcoming public meetings. Planners also want to collect stories of immigration and Cleveland Irish history.

Readers can share recollections at: [irishtownbendpark.org/your-stories](#). A street team related to the project will staff a table outside the Terminal Tower at Public Square during the parade to collect stories.

Raising awareness about the heritage site makes good sense at a time of year when Cleveland traditionally focuses on all things Irish, said Mark Owens, a native of Derry City in Northern Ireland and a longtime Cleveland resident who serves as honorary consul for Ireland in Cleveland.

"It's an opportunity to engage the entire community and bring us all together," said Owens, who also serves as vice president for marketing at Team NEO, the regional economic devel-

opment agency. "We're all engaged this week [for the holiday], but how do we keep this going all the year?"

## Beyond the Great Hunger

Propelled by a potato famine called The Great Hunger, Irish immigrants settled on the Irishtown hillside, where they helped launch what would become one of the largest European nationality groups in Northeast Ohio.

Residents of Irish ancestry now make up 13.4% of the more than 2 million residents in the Cleveland-Lorain-Elyria Metropolitan Statistical Area, as [cleveland.com](#) and The Plain Dealer reported last year.

If carried out according to plans, the heritage site in the future park will be the largest Irish history site in the city. It will add to existing monuments including the [Irish Cultural Garden](#) in Rockefeller Park and the bronze



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statue of Irish American world featherweight boxing champion [Johnny Kilbane](#) placed at Cleveland’s Battery Park in 2014.

It will also become part of a national collection of sites including Irish famine memorials in New York, Boston and other American cities. Cleveland’s Irish famine memorial is a stone Celtic cross installed in 2000 at Heritage Park on the East Bank of the Cuyahoga.

## Stabilization project

For decades, the Irishtown Bend hillside has threatened to collapse into the river from the west, potentially halting industrial shipping and rupturing a major sewer interceptor.

The Port of Cleveland is removing 250,000 cubic yards of soil placed as landfill decades ago below an escarpment near the top of the hillside. The Port is also building more than 2,000 linear feet of new bulkheads along the river’s edge.

The Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority bought the hillside in the late 1950s before building the modernist twin slabs of the Riverview Tower apartments atop the hill in 1963. CMHA later developed low-rise apartments on the hillside. Those dwellings were removed by 2000.

In the late 1990s, the housing agency explored building high-rise apartments along West 25th Street north of Riverview, but it later dropped the idea after discovering the slope was unstable.

The nonprofit Parkworks, a predecessor of LAND Studio, began assembling land on the hillside in 2009 as part of a project that eventually evolved into plans for Irishtown Bend Park. But the Port’s work had to come first.

Last year, the Port’s contractors started the two-year project after resolving a legal fight over acquiring a holdout property at the top of the hillside at Detroit Avenue and West 25th Street.

The stabilization includes re-contouring parts of the slope to incorporate features of the upcoming park, including a pond that will collect water from springs in the hillside. Work on the Irish heritage site could begin by late 2025, said Greg Peckham, LAND Studio’s executive director.



Coal dock remnants at Irishtown Bend Park.

## Design details

San Francisco-based landscape architect Scott Cataffa, a native of Youngstown who heads the firm of Plural, is the lead designer for the 25-acre park, where the heritage site will be a key attraction on a mile-long loop trail.

The trail will connect a dozen features including interpretive markers, the pond, panoramic overlooks, a riverfront walkway, railroad tunnels with heavy stone arches, and concrete pylons that supported cranes on a onetime coal dock.

The project will also complete the final section of the Cleveland Foundation Centennial Lake Link Trail, connecting the city’s Cleveland Lakefront Bikeway to the 101-mile regional Towpath Trail.

At the five-acre heritage site, Cataffa’s team envisions erecting a cluster of open-air steel structures that will rise directly above buried foundations in what was one of the most densely packed sections of Irishtown. The walls could be etched with 19th-century photographic images showing how crowded the area once was.

Because the foundations of houses on the hillside are now buried under 8 to 10 feet of soil, it would be impossible to excavate them without heavily re-grading the slope and installing prohibitively expensive retaining walls, Cataffa said.

Instead, he has proposed building outdoor rooms to suggest 19th century houses in the central portion of the site. Elsewhere, dozens of solitary steel doorframes will rise amid native grasses, suggesting addresses where houses once stood and hundreds lived, worked and raised families in a gritty, teeming, heavily polluted city.



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Interpretive markers at Irishtown Bend Park.



A walkway will recreate a once crowded alley that cut between rows of densely packed houses. The site could also include an open-air mockup of a 19th-century living room within the footprint of a former house. Visitors could picnic with a view of the downtown skyline while sitting on Victorian-era furniture cast in bronze. At another installation, a tabletop scale model cast in bronze would reproduce the steep contours and the grid of wood frame houses that once covered the hillside.

Although the Irish community filled much of Irishtown Bend, large portions of the slope were disturbed by construction of the Detroit Superior Bridge in 1918 and the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority's rapid transit viaduct in 1929.

The heritage site centers on Irishtown's most intact buried remains, near the southern end of the property, Cataffa and Peckham said. Cleveland State University and the Cleveland Museum of Natural History conducted a dig there in the late 1980s, which resulted in the archaeological site being listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990.

Concepts for the heritage site are based on the excavations, vintage insurance maps, and more recent surveys with ground-penetrating

radar that revealed building foundations and in one case, a brick cistern.

### Deep research

The archaeological area encompasses a portion of the hillside known as the Hiram Stone allotment after its original purchaser and developer. The historic site will occupy roughly half of the old allotment in an area downhill from the present-day Ohio City Farm and the CMHA Riverview Tower.

An 1851 advertising blurb claimed that the site boasted “the most delightful and romantic views that can be found west of the Hudson [River in New York].” Rapid residential development soon followed the arrival of a coal freight line.

By 1900, when population peaked on the hillside, more than 1,000 people were living in the old allotment, which straddled the current alignment of Franklin Boulevard as it descends from West 25th Street to Columbus Road.

Margaret Lynch, executive director of the Irish American Archives Society, said the organization has fully documented transactions for 75% of the 103 lots in the allotment, amounting to 1,472 transactions by 777 individuals and

organizations, the vast majority of whom were of Irish descent.

She described the hillside as a walk-to-work community, with dwellings packed around rail lines and a coal dock.

“This was a great place to live if you wanted to work,” Lynch said, “but it was a dirty, grimy place to live.”

Newspaper accounts often focused on poverty, disease and crime in Irishtown, reflecting derogatory views of Irish immigrants, Lynch said. But Cataffa said his research “dispels the idea this was a shanty town, because it was filled with brick and mortar and or wood frame structures; they weren’t temporary housing.”



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## Money needed

Irishtown Bend Park, including the historic site, won’t happen without additional money. Planners have raised \$19.5 million of the estimated \$40 million cost of building the 25-acre park, Peckham said.

Another \$5 million will be raised to provide a long-term endowment for maintenance and programming at the park. LAND Studio and its partners are now seeking large donations from foundations and through government grants before asking for contributions from individual donors.

Project partners are also holding conversations with the City of Cleveland and Cleveland Metroparks over which entity will ultimately own and manage the park, Peckham said.

Owens, Lynch and Peckham said that in addition to telling the story of Irish immigration, the park will celebrate the history of African Americans, Hungarians and European Jews who also settled on the hillside. Immigration, in short, is the guiding theme.

“If the only story is Irish, we haven’t done our job,” Peckham said.

## Immigration in context

Lynch said it’s important to recognize immigration at a time when anti-immigrant sentiment has become a major theme in the 2024 presidential election. Former president Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican candidate, said in December that immigrants are “poisoning the blood of our country.” President Joe Biden’s campaign likened the words to those of Adolf Hitler.

Lynch said it’s especially meaningful that Irishtown Bend Park will be adjacent to the Ohio City Farm, a project of CMHA and the nonprofit Re:Source Cleveland, formerly Refugee Response. As the city’s biggest urban farm, the self-sustaining project helps international refugees with agricultural experience to acclimatize to life in Cleveland by growing food for restaurants, farm stands and donation programs.

When she speaks about Irishtown, Lynch said she tries to “get people to understand who an immigrant might be — a person who is often leaving their homeland under adverse condi-



Interpretive markers at Irishtown Bend Park.

tions and just trying to get to a better place.” She said that for the Irish during the famine, Irishtown was one such place.

Owens echoed Lynch’s sentiments about seeing Irishtown as part of a larger historical arc.

“This is where we started when we first came here,” he said. “Now, it’s kind of full circle. We’re all coming back together at Irishtown Bend.”