

On the Irish Waterfront



Port of New York and New Jersey and Environs

Introduction

THE PORT'S IRISH PLACES

In 1524 the Florentine explorer Giovanni da Verrazano sailed through the narrows that now bear his name into the Upper Bay of New York Harbor. He found there “a commodious and delightful” navigable shelter sufficient to accommodate safely “any laden ship.” Eighty-five years later the British sea captain Henry Hudson piloted the Dutch East India Company’s three-mast *Half Moon* into this “Beautiful Lake.” Hudson was entranced by the “very good harbor for all windes” found in the future port’s “coliseum-like interior,” as it was aptly described by historian Russell Shorto. Between these journeys came other Europeans, including Esteban Gómez—a black Portuguese sailor working for the Spanish—and numerous French fur traders who encountered the Lenapes, a Native American people inhabiting the terrain that ringed the harbor.¹

By the late nineteenth century the dazzlingly multiethnic character of the now great metropolis echoed the diverse origins of its earliest European explorers, but only one group knew the port as *their* place. For if the port made New York, the Irish made the port. Hundreds of thousands of Irish people were among the “human freight” that poured into New York Harbor after 1815, and this steady stream became a flood in the Famine years between 1845 and the early 1850s. “Despite the consistent efforts to keep the immigrants moving,” wrote Robert Greenhalgh Albion in his classic *The Rise of New York Port* (1939), “a very large number remained in the city, accelerating its rapid rise in population. This was particularly true of the Irish; the Germans and English were apt to go inland at once.”²

It was Irish immigrant workers who dug the Erie Canal beginning in 1818. The canal secured the port’s future by opening a vast hinterland to trade. Many of these canal workers found their way back to newly established Irish neighborhoods in Lower Manhattan, especially the teeming Five Points, a short remove from the bustling piers near South Street on the Lower East

Side. The year 1818 also marked the inception of regularly scheduled transatlantic service between New York and Liverpool. Sailing packets with fixed routes—pioneered by the Black Ball Line—were the vehicle for New York’s dizzyingly rapid ascent to world city status as the capital of global commerce. That was only the beginning. With 771 miles of wharfage, relatively little fog or ice to hamper shipping, and a growing supply of cheap labor, the Port of New York boasted natural and human resources unlike those anywhere else in North America.³

While the New York Irish community was occupationally stratified in the first half of the nineteenth century—featuring a substantial pre-Famine cohort of skilled artisans both Catholic and Protestant—the port was built by impoverished Irish Catholic refugees who filled the most dangerous, lowest-paying jobs found in the city. Beginning with the area around South Street, the Irish came to dominate the waterfront precincts along both shores of Lower Manhattan, working the maritime industries in every capacity, with longshoremen predominating. “Irishmen took over New York’s docks” in the mid-nineteenth century, wrote Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace in *Gotham*:

On any given day five or six thousand of these “alongshoremen” moved mountains of cargo off ships and around the port, roaming from pier to pier for the “shape-ups” at which native-born stevedores amassed work crews. The work was hard, poorly paid, and erratic. While waiting for ships to arrive or weather to clear, men hung around local saloons, took alternate jobs as teamsters, boatmen, or brickmakers, and relied on the earnings of their wives and children.⁴

Stevedores hired men to load and unload ships: the work was exhausting, dangerous, and remarkably devoid of technological innovation from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Longshoremen, wrote labor historian David Montgomery, were “forced to push and pull enormous weights, aided only by the most elementary inclines, pulleys, winches, hooks and screws, and above all, by their own teamwork,” forged in ethnic solidarity. Since “by the 1850s the waterfront had become largely a white and Irish preserve,” historian Iver Bernstein explained, Irish longshoremen developed a proprietary attitude toward it and viewed with suspicion African Americans and later immigrant workers from eastern and southern Europe, the largest cohort by far coming from southern Italy.⁵

Waterfront work was erratic, seasonal, casual, and highly localized; longshoremen lived in very close proximity to the piers in order to respond quickly to the arrival of a ship. The earliest longshoremen’s unions were strictly local entities, rooted in shared ethnicity and a sense of neighborhood prerogative, a pattern that endured in the port for over a century. The carnage of the New York Draft Riots of July 1863 grew in part out

of the resentment of Irish dockworkers over the recent hiring of blacks as scab labor during a strike. Though the bloodshed occurred largely north of the most populous waterfront precincts, some Irish Americans seized the opportunity to declare that “work upon the docks... shall be attended to solely by and absolutely by members of the ‘Longshoremen’s Association’ and such white laborers as they see fit to permit upon the premises.”⁶

The Irish Waterfront Emerges

A coherent Irish waterfront began to take shape in the decades after the Civil War. Prior to the war Irish dockworkers were scattered in neighborhoods along both the Lower East and Lower West sides of Manhattan, with most maritime activity originating along the southwestern shore of the East River. Waterfront life was chaotic, disorganized, and dangerous. As early as 1870 the city’s antiquated wooden piers were condemned by the *New York Times* as “rotten structures, the abode of rats and the hiding places of river thieves.... [I]t is at great risk that a person can walk on them in broad daylight.” Irish surnames dominated the paper’s account of these disorderly piers, among lessees as well as victims: the city’s Common Council often made customary provision of a few thousand dollars to reimburse the likes of “Mike O’Brien or Tim McCarthy for the loss of his horse by falling through such and such a dock.”⁷

Before the “spectacular thievery” of Tammany Hall boss—or “grand sachem”—William M. Tweed landed him in jail in 1872, the leader of Manhattan’s Democratic organization concocted a municipal Department of Docks designed to yield a “patronage windfall” to Tammany. Reformers wished to see a master plan imposed on the chaotic waterfront; they hoped that the island’s decrepit piers would be supplanted by a design to “meet needs cultural as well as commercial.” But with the mayor in charge of appointments to the dock board, political needs came first as always. The department’s original plan of renovation called for new bulkhead construction along both the lower Hudson and East rivers, but the focus soon shifted almost entirely to the Lower West Side, where the interests of merchants, steamship companies, and Tammany Hall—now under Irish control—converged nicely. In 1897 the department supervised construction of municipally owned piers—upwards of seven hundred feet long—on riverfront terrain between Charles and Gansevoort streets. The West Side’s Irish waterfront coalesced around these imposing new structures before expanding rapidly northward up the Hudson shoreline. Between 1904 and 1909 nearly thirty-five miles of new wharves materialized.⁸

The transformation of the West Side was swift. The Irish waterfront’s southern anchor, Greenwich Village, remained “a solidly middle class neighborhood that the older residents liked to call the ‘American Ward’” in the

years prior to the construction of new piers in the area. “The majority of the residents had English surnames as late as 1890,” historian Thomas J. Shelley noted; a decade later the neighborhood was 40 percent Irish. The Village was an early beneficiary of municipally sponsored pier construction. The first masonry bulkhead was installed at the foot of Christopher Street in 1874, and piers soon covered the waterfront from there south to Canal Street. Hundreds of tenements quickly sprang up, “jammed into a warren of narrow streets.” The removal of Thirteenth Avenue—built on landfill in the mid-nineteenth century at water’s edge in the West Village and adjoining Chelsea—made possible the construction of enormous new piers to accommodate international shipping concerns.⁹

An Irish Catholic parish for the West Village, St. Veronica’s, was established just east of the Hudson riverbank in 1887; Mass was celebrated “in a warehouse and stable” on Washington Street prior to the construction in 1890 of a basement church on Christopher Street, a very brief stroll from the tumult of Piers 45 and 46. St. Veronica’s parish encompassed the compact waterfront terrain from Houston Street north to Bank Street and from Hudson Street west to the river. Most male parishioners worked as longshoremen and teamsters when work could be found; it took thirteen years for the impoverished parish to build a smallish upper church. By 1903 total attendance at Sunday Masses often exceeded six thousand souls. Poor as they were, the Irish parishioners of St. Veronica’s and another longshoremen’s church nearby, St. Bernard’s on West Fourteenth Street, loyally supported their own parishes and aided others in even more precarious straits. According to Shelley, “Irish longshoremen who worked on the Hudson River piers became the backbone of the Italian Church of St. Anthony of Padua” on nearby West Houston Street.¹⁰

By the 1920s Greenwich Village was “overwhelmingly Catholic,” firmly in Irish control, and a Tammany stronghold celebrated as “the cradle of New York Democracy.” Moving up Manhattan Island there was Hell’s Kitchen, the northern terminus of the Irish waterfront covering roughly the terrain between West Thirty-fourth and West Fifty-ninth streets from Eighth Avenue to the river. A remote rural area prior to the opening of a Hudson River Railroad station at Tenth Avenue and West Thirtieth Street in 1851, “the district grew up helter skelter,” according to Luc Sante, “a malodorous environment of slaughterhouses, soap and glue factories, and waterfront effluvia, in patches that bore names like Poverty Lane and Misery Row.” Hell’s Kitchen drew throngs of Germans, African Americans, and especially Irish in the decades that followed, immigrants as well as those fleeing other parts of the city. As Henry J. Browne wrote of the neighborhood’s flagship parish, which local tradition placed “one stop above” Hell’s Kitchen, “Sacred Heart was so Irish in its beginnings, and for about half of its history, that one runs down lists of names in baptismal and marriage registers with incredulity.” Browne found that of two thousand donors subscribed to help

build a new church at Fifty-first Street between Ninth and Tenth avenues in 1884, only twenty-two names were not clearly Irish.¹¹

Between Hell's Kitchen and Greenwich Village lay Chelsea, the heart and soul of the Irish waterfront. Chelsea originated as an Anglo-Protestant stronghold centering on "Millionaires' Row" along Twenty-third Street between Ninth and Tenth avenues and the General Theological Seminary, built two blocks to the south by the Episcopal Church in the 1820s and 1830s. Most of the surrounding neighborhood was carved out of the estate owned by the family of Dr. Clement Clarke Moore (author of "A Visit from St. Nicholas," better known as "The Night before Christmas"), whose country home once dominated the Chelsea landscape. A small cohort of Irish immigrants was attracted to Chelsea as early as the 1840s by construction sites along the Hudson River Railroad lines; others joined Scottish and German immigrants seeking work in small factories established in the neighborhood.¹²

The construction of the Chelsea Piers (1902–1910) between West Seventeenth and West Twenty-third streets provided the Irish waterfront's focal point. The monumental pier sheds designed by the firm of Warren and Wetmore—architects of the equally magnificent Grand Central Terminal—assumed iconic significance at the heart of the port for both their beauty and their advanced engineering. "Warren and Wetmore invested the fashionable Modern French façades" of the pier sheds, according to a team of New York architectural historians, "with a strikingly monumental grandeur and simplified but overscaled details. The river façades, which sheltered open observation platforms, were contrastingly festive transformations of the utilitarian steel piers which lay behind the street façades, and greeted the arriving passenger with a flutter of pennants and trophies."¹³

The Chelsea Piers drew thousands of Irish Americans to the neighborhood, including many West Side dockworkers "displaced" by the movement of shipping lines from West Village piers to their new location just blocks to the north. The *New York Times* reported in 1910 that longshoremen attached to Pier 48, at the foot of Perry Street in the West Village, "expressed regret" that they would "have to move north to be nearer their work" at the new Pier 61—barely half a mile upriver—slated for occupancy by the relocating White Star Line. West Side dockworkers lived among compatriots from the same county, if not the same village, in the west of Ireland; their residential proximity to the piers rendered the Irish waterfront's localism as intensive as at any site in the urban American experience.¹⁴

Ethnic Succession Irish Waterfront–Style

From this Chelsea foundation a dominant Irish Catholic waterfront ethos emerged in the years just prior to the First World War. The magnificent new

pier façades suggested a waterfront cathedral: a monument to the ascendant forces of Tammany, church, and commerce that solidified Irish waterfront power. Tammany's first Irish grand sachem, "Honest John" Kelly, married the niece of New York's Archbishop John McCloskey, who became America's first cardinal in 1875. Kelly's successor once removed, Charles Francis Murphy, quietly brokered the transformation of derelict North River piers into the jewels of the Irish waterfront during his late 1890s stint as commissioner of the city's docks. Murphy became in the process the Irish waterfront's first millionaire. The Tammany-consecrated Irish American leaders of the ILA—whose headquarters was moved to Chelsea during the war—clearly shared the views of Cardinal McCloskey's successor Archbishop (later Cardinal) John Farley, who in 1907 "half-boasted, half-complained" that "New York...has only one class of people [the Irish Americans] to draw upon for the support of their own churches and schools, as well as the maintenance of so many others."¹⁵

It was their church, their port: from Tammany politicians—who made their fortunes from leasing, contracting, and licensing fees relating to the piers—to a small but rapidly rising entrepreneurial class who saw their waterfront opportunities from stevedoring to towboats and seized them, the waterfront belonged to the Irish. The claim staked on the world's richest piers by a vast cadre of Irish American longshoremen was akin to a hereditary birthright. As of the late 1880s, "95 per cent of the longshoremen of New York, both foreign and coastwise, were Irish and Irish-Americans," wrote Charles B. Barnes in his classic 1915 study *The Longshoremen*.¹⁶

The near-total Irish American dominance of the West Side's waterfront neighborhoods turned diffuse cultural forms into militantly enforced codes of conduct. An inviolable code of silence provided the foundation of cultural and religious authority on the Irish waterfront. The sources of this practice are difficult to locate precisely though its roots are evident in both rural Irish and urban American experience. If the code's origins remain suffused in a blend of myth, history, and speculation, we can trace its efficacy as wielded by the second-generation Irish Americans who ruled the West Side waterfront after 1900. These men were coolly indifferent to their ancestry: they had turf to protect, power to sustain, and fortunes yet to be won. They readily adapted cultural and religious forms designed to bolster their authority, reshaping traditionally Irish notions of deference, linguistic evasion, and tactical silence into the West Side's Irish waterfront idiom.¹⁷

The West Side's distinctive code of silence was prefigured in Charles Francis Murphy's post-Gilded Age waterfront deal making. The most revealing story from Tammany's well-stocked annals treats the Fourth of July celebration during which Murphy—who moved up from commissioner of docks to grand sachem in 1902 and remained there until his death in 1924—failed to join in singing "The Star Spangled Banner." When asked by a reporter why

Mr. Murphy remained silent, Tammany's secretary Thomas F. Smith replied, "Perhaps he didn't want to commit himself." On the Irish waterfront, unauthorized acts of speech and writing were viewed with the gravest suspicion. In the 1890s the reform journalist E. L. Godkin alleged that Tammany leaders feared biography more than the penitentiary. Godkin was an anti-Irish bigot but the fact remains there *are* no biographies of the leading political, labor, and entrepreneurial figures who dominated the Port of New York from 1890 to 1950, men who ranked for decades among the most powerful figures in their vast region: Frank Hague, Joseph P. Ryan, and William J. McCormack, the waterfront's "Mr. Big." These and many others who served under them in the waterfront hierarchy—along with the pastors who validated their regimes—kept personal papers strictly "in their hats," denying us knowledge of their responses to such issues as the rapid displacement of the Irish as the port's dominant constituency, an event that unfolded very early in the era of Irish waterfront supremacy.¹⁸

By the end of World War I Italian American dockworkers outnumbered the Irish everywhere in the port save Manhattan's West Side. Even there an Italian neighborhood initially created just east of Sixth Avenue in Greenwich Village was twice as populous by 1910 as the Irish waterfront stronghold to its west; the disparity widened further as the Italian enclave expanded following the Irish dockworker exodus to nearby Chelsea. Yet Italian Americans never achieved full access to employment on the West Village piers: for many years Italian dock workers were regularly hired by only one among the many steamship companies housed at the Chelsea Piers, where they were largely restricted to coal handling, a job beyond the pale for Irish longshoremen.¹⁹

An epic struggle over ethnic succession in the Port was waged most dramatically not along the West Side but directly across the North River in Hudson County, New Jersey. Hudson County was often dismissed by New Yorkers as a remote outpost, but our story locates this most distinctive of New Jersey's twenty-one counties very near to the heart of the volatile port. The Irish ruled church, state, and waterfront throughout that densely populated, immigrant-dominated community by the end of World War I. As on the West Side, Italian newcomers seeking work on the bustling piers of Hoboken and Jersey City were obliged to cross through Irish waterfront terrain. Jersey City's Italians first congregated southwest of the Irish waterfront "Horseshoe" neighborhood and later even farther inland in the city's Marion neighborhood. In Hoboken "West of Willow" (the avenue seven blocks removed from the Hudson) was an Irish euphemism for the near border of the Italian American community.²⁰

Yet in Hudson County Italians not only found work on the piers but they also built a powerful civic presence between the World Wars. The distinguished journalist Richard Reeves wrote of his 1940s Jersey City childhood, "I grew up thinking America was an Italian country governed by the

Irish.” The experience of a pair of cousins exemplified the difference in ethnic politics between the West Side and the Jersey side. In 1939 the talented and ambitious Carmine De Sapio ousted Greenwich Village’s Democratic district leader Dan Finn, the third consecutive Dan Finn to hold the office in a dynasty as old as the century. Tammany Hall responded to the shocking electoral outcome by refusing to seat De Sapio: it took two more elections before the dwindling machine accepted the inevitable; De Sapio finally became district leader in 1943 but enjoyed precious little patronage power on the nearby piers still wholly dominated by the Irish.

In Hoboken Carmine’s cousin Fred De Sapio became the city’s first Italian American mayor in 1947 after his “fusion” ticket of three Italian Americans and two Irishmen ousted the long-entrenched regime of Bernard McFeely. De Sapio soon became embroiled in Hudson County’s endemic political corruption but he also did something unthinkable for a West Side politician of any ethnicity: he reached out to the New York labor priest and reformer John M. Corridan in early 1953, as the battle for the soul of the port reached its peak. De Sapio’s gesture was an important step in the long struggle to produce the Corridan-inspired *On the Waterfront*, a film shot in Hoboken based on events that took place on the West Side. The Irish waterfront was made and unmade in encounters between the West Side’s tribalism and the fluid if volatile ethnic dynamics found along the opposing shore of Hudson County.²¹

South Brooklyn’s vast swath of New York Harbor constituted the anti-Irish waterfront. There an ethnic “sea of every racial stock” (as onetime Brooklyn cop and future New York City mayor Bill O’Dwyer described the waterfront precinct he patrolled during World War I) quickly gave way in the 1920s to Italian dominance of the borough’s thriving Red Hook piers, just as the shipping industry established its stronghold in that massive waterfront complex. Work, housing, and social and religious institutions radiated from Red Hook’s Columbia Street hub, forging South Brooklyn’s answer to Irish Chelsea. The Irish Americans who still ran Brooklyn’s powerful Democratic machine during the 1930s and 1940s grudgingly ceded the borough’s waterfront politics and its rampant profiteering to Italian control, alternately scorning the newcomers and dreading the political implications of their ascent.²²

Brooklyn also witnessed the emergence of other ethnic waterfronts. Widely scattered enclaves of Norwegian, Polish, Hungarian, and Slavic American dockworker communities emerged there—and elsewhere around the port—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For decades members of these groups were generically mislabeled “Austrian” by the Irish waterfront’s arbiters of ethnic identity. In fact, the communities ringing New York Harbor grew so diverse by the 1930s—outsiders even made their way into the residential heart of the West Side’s three historic Irish strongholds—that the “Irish waterfront” no longer designated a discreet geographic and

spiritual entity. It now symbolized retrenchment and often violent resistance against challenges to its dwindling hegemony in the port.²³

The West Side bosses of the ILA feared one such challenge from a historically prominent population on the New York–New Jersey waterfront. African American longshoremen worked in the port from the mid-nineteenth century onward; growing patterns of housing segregation drove blacks farther from the workplace than Euro-American dockworkers. While there is evidence that Italians were regarded as non-white by some Irish longshoremen, the port's largest ethnic constituency readily controlled a large portion of waterfront turf by the late 1920s, unlike black dockworkers who were prevented by custom and force from establishing a claim to piers of their own. Largely frozen out of regular longshoremen's work gangs prior to World War II, black dockworkers were often relegated to work as "extras" handling "certain disagreeable cargoes such as bananas that had been refused by white ethnics." Shapeups for hiring blacks were often conducted far from the piers: on Lenox Avenue in Harlem, for example, "straw bosses" would "come and pick out who they wanted" from crowds of men seeking work.

By the end of World War II, between four and five thousand African American longshoremen regularly sought work in the port, including sizable contingents in Jersey City and Newark. In Brooklyn the largely African American Local 968 enrolled a membership of a thousand men, but as its president Cleophas Jacobs explained, shippers, hiring bosses, and union officials "have an agreement whereby the available work is given to the other nine [white] locals in Brooklyn, to the exclusion of our men." The waterfront Irish grew so concerned with threats to their primal claim on the port by "outsiders"—Italians, blacks, communists, or a dreaded coalition of all three—they would be caught off-guard by insurgencies from within, challenges to authority of such passionate intensity as to sometimes bewilder the Irish insurgents themselves.²⁴

Cockeye Dunn Shot Me

If African American dockworkers were treated as permanent outsiders on the Irish waterfront, longshoremen of all colors were rendered virtually invisible in urban locales just beyond the piers. Public access to the New York–New Jersey waterfront ranged from daunting to near impossible, with a tangle of rail yards, streets jammed with wagons and trucks, and dangerous-looking saloons with their loitering customers forming an imposing barrier that separated the various urban publics from the piers. When outsiders did take an interest in dockworkers, their near invisibility was often cited as the waterfront's most salient feature. "You whiz by him on the West Side Highway but you don't see him," wrote Budd Schulberg in his first of many nonfiction pieces devoted to longshoremen, a December 1952

essay for the *New York Times Magazine*. “You hurry past him as you board ship for Europe or a winter cruise through the Caribbean, and you never notice his face.” As late as 1955—after a string of prizewinning waterfront exposés, sensational public hearings, and an Academy Award-winning film written by Schulberg himself—he could still marvel at the willingness of the *New York Times*, a venerable West Side institution, to “live in blissful co-existence only a few blocks apart” yet light years removed from Hell’s Kitchen ILA Pistol Local 824.²⁵

In Greenwich Village, dock workers and civilians “studiously ignored one another,” as Thomas Shelley aptly put it, even as they shared urban space. There were notable exceptions: early in the twentieth century, marauding Irish waterfront gangs like the Hudson Dusters threw “wild affairs that lasted for days and became the stuff of local legend,” attracting downtown bohemians including playwright Eugene O’Neill and his friend Dorothy Day, who later founded the Catholic Worker movement. But by the 1940s tourists strolling through the neighborhood were largely oblivious to its still dominant industry and its colorful traditions. Visitors seeking a taste of Village bohemia were drawn instead to 57 Grove Street, where Charlie Parker and his bebop confreres regularly performed at the oldest jazz club in New York City, Arthur’s Tavern. Next door at 59 Grove an engraved plaque on the building’s exterior wall informed history buffs that in 1809 Thomas Paine, revolutionary pamphleteer and author of *Common Sense*, died in a farmhouse once located on the site.²⁶

There is no plaque outside 61 Grove to commemorate a homicide committed there on the morning of January 8, 1947, which signaled the beginning of the end of the Irish waterfront. Local gangster and businessman John “Cockeye” Dunn—accompanied by a pair of confederates—gunned down Anthony Hintz in daylight as he descended the stairwell of his apartment building in the heart of bustling Sheridan Square. Andy Hintz (as in “pints”) was en route to his job on Pier 51 when he took six bullets plus several kicks to the head and body. Hintz was shot because he refused to turn over Pier 51’s lucrative “loading racket” to the ruthless, politically connected Dunn.

The loading racket was an unsavory West Side tradition. Truckers sent to deposit and pick up cargoes stacked pierside by longshoremen were routinely tied up for hours on jammed, narrow roadways. In the years after World War I employers grew tired of dispatching crews of workers to the piers only to have them idled by such thick congestion. It proved more efficient to employ the services of “public loaders” to move the cargoes to waiting trucks. In the 1930s waterfront entrepreneurs turned public loading from an optional service into a mandatory racket: truckers paid a steep loading fee whether they received the service or not. As Malcolm Johnson reported, “the trucker who balked at the shakedown did not get his merchandise, and his driver came home bloody.”²⁷

While the shapeup hiring system became the most notorious symbol of waterfront corruption, the loading racket was the port's uniquely insidious signature, a practice unknown in other harbors around the United States. The rise of the loading racket coincided with "King Joe" Ryan's tenure as ILA president. In response to the condemnation of the loaders as "organized banditti" by a shippers' group in 1930, Ryan characteristically asserted, "I think the loading situation is in very fine shape." As a wholly unregulated practice, control of the loading on a given pier was customarily acquired at gunpoint, enabling a violent racketeer like Cockeye Dunn—backed by his smooth-talking brother-in-law Eddie McGrath—to ascend to the status of legitimate businessman. Dunn eventually won control of the loading on most of the Lower West Side's piers. On Pier 51 Andy Hintz was a rare holdout. He operated as a pier foreman and boss loader, hiring both longshoremen and public loaders. But Hintz "wouldn't hire any of Dunn's hoodlums," recalled a New York detective who knew him well. "He didn't care if a guy maybe had done a little time, but he wanted no part of organized gangsters."²⁸

Cockeye Dunn also harbored an older Pier 51 grudge: in 1942 a hiring boss named Edward J. Kelly had transgressed the code of silence after enduring a brutal beating by Dunn in his first bid to conquer the pier. Kelly's shocking action led to Dunn's conviction on charges of coercion, but Cockeye was soon paroled, putatively as an asset to the war effort. Dunn's well-placed backers on and off the waterfront informed parole officials that "the clergy of his locality . . . who are well acquainted with him" vouched for Dunn's "excellent reputation." Once back in circulation Cockeye and Eddie McGrath "moved like feudal princes through the streets of the West Side."²⁹

Dunn employed public loaders on the piers he controlled and ran the fictitious union that represented his workers, a characteristic feature of the port's labor relations practices. He also ran a murder-for-hire business that seemed only to enhance his standing as a "smooth-operating waterfront cartel" and pillar of a brutal hierarchy reinforced by culture, ethnicity, and religion. In the weeks prior to the Andy Hintz shooting, Dunn's underling Andrew "Squint" Sheridan stalked the rugged hiring boss. The vision-impaired triggerman (he had shot and killed at least one unintended victim) was, like Dunn, a product of the Catholic Protectory, a storied Northeast Bronx orphanage/reform school founded in the 1860s by an Anglo convert to Catholicism haunted by the familiar sight of "orphaned or abandoned kids, mostly Irish, who roamed the city's streets, ragged and often dangerous." Rescued from that fate Dunn and Sheridan became preeminent upholders of the West Side code, one of whose commandments dictated that recalcitrant marked men be afforded a final opportunity to capitulate.

Andy Hintz instead greeted Squint Sheridan with loud insults for Dunn and "that dressed-up consumptive brother-in-law of his," which explains

why Cockeye's finger was on the trigger that morning on Grove Street. In most other respects the execution was a routine happening and went virtually unreported by the city's newspapers prior to April 1, when the Manhattan district attorney's office announced the murder indictments of Dunn, Squint Sheridan, and Daniel Gentile, alias Danny Brooks. "Longshoremen were always getting shot, or beaten over the head with baseball bats, or flung into the harbor," wrote former Manhattan assistant district attorney William Keating in 1956. "Waterfront murders were the most hopeless of cases.... The murderers were usually well known, but arrests and convictions were unheard of.... [T]o talk was to rat, and to rat was to stand exposed and unprotected."³⁰

In 1953 the respected labor journalist Guy Richards asserted in the *New York Journal-American* that there had been "more than 100 waterfront murders since 1928." At the time of Hintz's shooting, no killer or killers had ever been convicted of their crimes. "The West Side Code," wrote journalist T. J. English, was "a tradition so sacred that even non-criminal types saw that it was adhered to.... [U]nder no circumstances did anyone talk to the cops." But Hintz's wife, Maisie, did talk to the cops. When they arrived at the crime scene she impulsively reported, "I kept asking him who were the rats that shot him and he said, 'Johnny Dunn shot me.'" Andy Hintz meanwhile refused to expire in a timely manner. Perhaps seeking to deflect the heat from his wife, Hintz identified Dunn as his assailant when Cockeye was brought to the foot of his deathbed at St. Vincent's Hospital. He offered a "dying declaration" for use at Dunn's trial before succumbing on January 29, 1947.³¹

Cockeye Dunn's pitch-perfect alibi—he was dropping his children for daily Mass at their church in Queens at the time of the shooting—lost its customary efficacy when Maisie Hintz, who had fled to Miami in advance of the December 1947 trial, rematerialized to offer testimony. So too did Willie Hintz, the brother who was waiting for Andy in his car on Grove Street when Hintz was shot. Others took the stand to corroborate elements of the prosecution's case. Dunn's shell-shocked defense team could only sputter that the appearance of these witnesses proved Cockeye was being framed, since nobody from the West Side would ever testify voluntarily. His attorney alleged, "This case has an unwritten script that was designed to ensnare an innocent man," but it was in fact a time-dishonored unwritten script that was being torn up in this case. Prosecutors justifiably touted the "miracle" of testimony resulting in the conviction—and sentencing to death—of Dunn, professional assassin Squint Sheridan, and Daniel Gentile, would-be concessionaire of the numbers racket on Pier 51.³²

Cockeye Dunn lived another eighteen months; from Death Row and beyond he remained a specter haunting the waterfront and New York City's political life. Novelists and filmmakers ruminated over the reasons for his depravity. There was nothing new in these imaginative efforts to treat an

individual's criminality as the distilled essence of an inhumane social and economic order. But on the West Side Irish waterfront there was one difference: those who, like John Dunn, were most intimate with violence *did* seem to achieve not just temporal power but a kind of mythic stature for their unmediated knowledge of the world as it truly worked.

Early 1949 found Cockeye Dunn suddenly talkative in his cell at Sing Sing in the presence of New York prosecutors; but just as abruptly he turned "silent to the end," as the *New York Times* reported, when he faced his executioners on July 7. If Cockeye had talked in hopes of a reprieve—as reported at the time—the gesture was oddly resonant with a new waterfront dispensation he had inadvertently helped usher in by shooting a longshoreman whose wife spoke up, followed by the victim himself, then his brother, then a skein of witnesses with no overt link to the victim—a stream of testimony issuing from the core of this Irish waterfront oppressed by decades of fear, intimidation, and the certainty of reprisal. Dunn commenced talking at precisely the moment when Malcolm Johnson, a *New York Sun* investigative reporter, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for a series of articles blasting open the code of silence, highlighted by his exhaustive account of Dunn, the dark prince of waterfront rackets.³³

From Edward J. Kelly, to Maisie, Andy, and Willie Hintz, to Malcolm Johnson and the Jesuit labor priest who guided him, perhaps even to Dunn himself for making of his own violent life a story too significant to go permanently uncovered, the stories were beginning to flow by the latter 1940s. Waterfront figures lately deemed permanently untouchable were now marked for exposure. A postwar decade of struggle pitted the spiritual primacy of silence against insurgent acts of speech as witness. It was an apocryphal story, but it coursed through the "kite," the Irish waterfront's intricately encoded grapevine of rumor, innuendo, and home truth: the priest sent to hear Cockeye Dunn's final confession, it was said, couldn't understand English.³⁴