



Garden State Legacy's Genealogy column author, Maureen Wlodarczyk, is an avid genealogist with over 30 years' experience, an author, a columnist and a speaker about genealogy. Maureen's first two books, both true "Jersey" stories of the 19th century, are the result of Maureen's own surprising and poignant family research discoveries. Maureen also writes a column about Hudson County historical people, places and events for the *River View Observer* newspaper. In reviewing Maureen's first book, *Past-Forward: A Three-Decade and Three-Thousand-Mile Journey Home*, the New Jersey Genealogical Society called the book "an excellent example of taking genealogy far beyond just names and places and dates by including personal stories, summaries of the research process and what emotions are uncovered in the quest to find our ancestors," and said that *Past-Forward* would be valuable to "anyone who has an interest in the journey of seeking their ancestors." Find out more about Maureen, including a recording of her recent interview on The Authors Show internet radio program, at [www.past-forward.com](http://www.past-forward.com).

## Warts and All...

That's how I like my genealogy. I started doing family research more than three decades ago motivated by an appetite for history and affection for my beloved maternal grandmother Kate. Kate, born into the societal propriety of the dawning twentieth century, survived a turbulent childhood punctuated by parental indiscretion, death and desertion. She carried her parents' shame as if her own and, no wonder, subscribed to the maxim that one should not air their dirty linen in public . . . nor rattle family skeletons in an attempt to bring them back to life. Notwithstanding the mitochondrial DNA that Kate and I shared, I was clearly born without that reticence gene when it comes to unearthing family history.

While I never could have predicted or even imagined the discoveries I would make and the people I would meet on my genealogical journey, I can say that being equally open to the good, the bad and the ugly of things made the trip infinitely more intriguing and resonant for me. My Irish story is sorely lacking "triumphs," beyond the basic achievement of my ancestors having survived their hardscrabble lives both in Ireland and Jersey City. And while there is something to say for ancestral accomplishments and the family pride that comes with those, in my experience, it is the tragedies and the disappointments of their lives that prick our hearts like a nettle, bring poignant imaginations to our minds and join our souls in communion with theirs. Whether we admire them for their successes and character or for their dogged perseverance in the face of repeated setbacks and questionable life decisions, we know we owe them our very lives and, either way, they have our gratitude and we are the continuation of their existence.

Case in point, my grandmother Kate's long-hidden secret about her mother (my great-grandmother), Mamie Flannelly, born in Jersey City in 1878 to Irish immigrant parents: Mamie had a baby son out of wedlock in 1898. (Please refer to paragraph one above, "parental indiscretion.") Despite often asking Kate about her childhood and her Irish family, starting when I was a teenager and first curious about genealogy, it was some years before she shared that shameful secret, a burden she had been carrying around like a niggling kidney stone since that very childhood. When she did, in the midst of the sexual revolution, hippies, and the first man walking on the moon, I quickly told her, with great conviction and specific examples, that her mother's indiscretion paled in comparison to the routine goings-on in the late 1960s, although I doubt that gave her any real comfort or changed her perception of her mother's fall from grace.

Kate passed away in 1988 taken by the cruel effects of Alzheimer's. Although she no longer knew me when she died, she has never left me and the search for her story (and so mine) has impacted me and the direction and wanderings of my life's journey. Nearly twenty years after Kate's passing, I conquered the elusive history of her Irish ancestry and, unable to sit next to her and offer up her own special episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?*, I found myself writing it down as if telling it to her as I had meant to. That became my first book, *Past-Forward: A Three-Decade and Three-Thousand-Mile Journey Home*. One reader called it a



Kate

*Genealogists  
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“love letter” to my grandmother. I like to think Kate would have seen it that way but, thinking back to her “dirty linen” lectures, perhaps not.

As it turned out, the journey of Kate’s secret was not then over and so many years after she told it to me, it would be revealed to another family, bringing them new knowledge and understanding of their own beloved grandparent. Just a few months after *Past-Forward* was released, the first season of *Who Do You Think You Are?* was generating a new wave of interest in genealogical research and that naturally resulted in an influx of new users on Ancestry.com. Ever the genealogical snoop and knowing that no matter how much you find out, there is always something else waiting to be discovered, I periodically browse the family trees and message boards on Ancestry looking for possible family connections. One such browsing expedition brought me to a family tree I had not seen before, one that included my grandmother Kate. There was no way I could resist an attempt at connecting with the owner of that tree. I sent a message through Ancestry, explaining that I was Kate’s granddaughter and believed I must be related to them. It wasn’t long before a response came back, communication started ping-ponging back and forth and I figured out our familial relationship: second cousins—having the same great-grandparents . . . well, not exactly.

Under “normal” circumstances, my newly-found second cousin Patrick and I would have the same great-grandparents, my grandmother Kate’s parents. In fact, my new cousin was the namesake (first, middle and last names) of Kate’s father. Therein was the problem. While my new cousin and I definitely shared the same great-grandmother (Kate’s mother Mamie), he is descended of the baby boy she gave birth to out of wedlock, a baby not fathered by the man she eventually married. I, however, am descended of the man she married, meaning that Patrick and I have different great-grandfathers. Complicating matters was the fact that Patrick was named for *my* great-grandfather, a man with whom he has no biological connection. From our back and forth communications, it was clear to me that Patrick had no clue about the illegitimacy or the contradiction in his name. I heard a little voice in my head say “Now what?”

That soft voice was followed in short order by my husband’s more animated voice saying “you *wouldn’t*” in response to me telling him about Patrick. Seeing from the look on my face and lack of immediate response that I probably “*would*,” he warned me (appropriately) of Patrick’s possible reaction to me telling him the family secret. What to do? I was born with an overabundance of the gene responsible for the trait of being solution-oriented, a sort of logic-dominated optimism that makes one instinctively believe there is an answer out there for every problem. In that mindset, I quickly had a plan.

First, I broadly told Patrick that my years of researching our family had yielded many surprising discoveries, not all of them positive or pleasant. He said he wanted to know everything, no matter what. I got a bit more specific and said I was willing to share everything with him but I *knew* he would find out things that would likely be shocking or upsetting and he should really think about whether he wanted to know those things. He said he was sure he did. Rather than dropping an email “bomb” on his branch of the family tree, I suggested that he read *Past-Forward* as that



Mamie  
Flannelly's son  
by John Nagle

would answer virtually all his questions and allow him time to take it all in. He agreed. I waited, wondering if I would soon lose my new cousin to his discoveries.

Less than two weeks later, an email from Patrick popped up on my computer screen. I hesitated for a few seconds and then opened the email, not knowing what to expect. It was a wonderful message and I still have it. Patrick and two of his siblings had each read *Past-Forward* and, as I anticipated, the revelation that their dear grandfather was born to our unwed great-grandmother was a total surprise to them. What did Patrick say? He said he was “blown away.” He thanked me for “telling the world” the story of our Irish family. He described his beloved grandfather (“Pop-Pop”) who lived to be 92 and said that finding out about his grandfather’s difficult early life made him love him “even more.” He suspected his own father never knew the true story either and wondered if it was because his grandfather was “ashamed” and hid it. If he was, he and my Kate, his half-sister, shared that burden.

Genealogists know that shame is often part of the connective fabric of family stories. Tenacious as a garden weed, it can insidiously invade our family roots suppressing the passing of family history and supplanting honest truth with made-up tales and well-intentioned fabrications. For some, that is a good thing, but not for me . . . or for Patrick.

I have a close friend who I have helped research her own Jersey City family. She was particularly curious about a story surrounding the death of her great-grandmother and the subsequent splitting up of her children (including my friend’s grandmother) followed by the remarriage of her great-grandfather to another woman with whom he had more children, despite having relinquished the custody and care of the children of his first marriage. The search led me to three newspaper articles in the *Jersey Journal* in the first years of the 1900s that shed a harsh light on the circumstances of her great-grandmother’s marriage and “disposition” of her children after her premature death. One reported that her great-grandmother had been arrested for deserting her husband and six children. She returned to him soon after, only to die the following year in her early thirties.

After her death her husband, the father of the six children, claiming an inability to care for them, placed them with other families in and outside Jersey City. To place his two youngest daughters, one of them my friend’s grandmother, then 8-years-old, he took out an ad in the *Jersey Journal* in 1911 asking that someone come forward and take them. This prompted a reporter from that newspaper to visit the family home and take a photograph of the two little girls that appeared in the paper the next day with the caption “OUR MOTHER IS DEAD—WON’T SOMEONE TAKE US?”

My friend had a very strong reaction to seeing the newspaper articles, a stew of shock, anger, and sadness, seasoned with suspicion about the circumstances of her great-grandmother’s death so soon after returning to her husband. In retrospect, I wondered if I did the right thing in showing her the articles. She did know that the children were split up I reasoned . . . but to see the photograph and caption as it appeared in the newspaper was something else.

I attempted to soothe her understandable upset by reminding her that



my own great-grandfather, my grandmother Kate's father, had deserted his children after the premature death of his wife in 1913 and those children too were parceled out to others to care for them. Since the "misery loves company" approach may not be the best way to help people deal with family history disappointments, we all need to be prepared for the discovery of sad family events and circumstances, those revelations often being a natural consequence of the research we do for ourselves and for others.

Speaking of newspaper revelations, I had one myself, months after *Past-Forward* was published. With no expectation of finding anything, I did a search in Jersey City newspapers on GenealogyBank under the surname Flannelly. Among the meager results was a February 1898 article blandly titled "Laundry Employees Dance." It reported that the second annual ball of the Manhattan Laundry Employees' Association, held at Columbia Hall in the Greenville section of Jersey City, had been attended by over five hundred people. The "opening march" starting the evening was led by the Association President John Nagle and Miss Mamie Flannelly, my great-grandmother, who worked at the laundry as an "ironer."

Mamie's illegitimate son, fathered by her dance partner John Nagle, was born seven and a half months after the night of that dance. No photos of Mamie exist and reading the newspaper article, I found myself envisioning her in a lovely floor-length dress with her long red hair pinned up stylishly. I imagined her excitement, anticipation and pride as she prepared for the big night and the honor of leading the opening dance with her "fellow." Could she have imagined that eight months later she would be in such changed circumstances? How different her co-workers must have felt about her. Did they pity her disgrace or was she, like Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, a "scarlet woman" in their eyes? And why did John Nagle abandon her? Did he suffer any disgrace or was it just hers to bear? I will never know. Still, in keeping with my cockeyed genealogical optimism, I was comforted by the thought that there was something of a relationship between Mamie and John Nagle, a connection somehow severed but living on as a family secret guarded by my grandmother Kate for more than a half-century. 

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