

# HISTORY & Mystery Perfect Together!



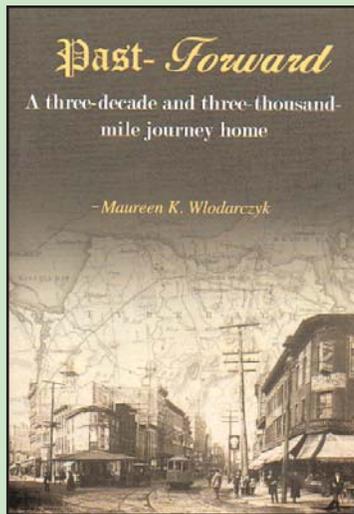
Garden State Legacy's Genealogy column author, Maureen Wlodarczyk, is an avid genealogist with over 30 years' experience, an author, a columnist and a speaker about genealogy. Maureen's first two books, both true "Jersey" stories of the 19th century, are the result of Maureen's own surprising and poignant 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).

There are a few undeniable time-tested truths related to genealogical searching, one of those being that when you feel sure you have exhausted all avenues for uncovering anything more about your family history, you *will* discover something else. While those unexpected discoveries may be the result of something readily explainable, such as new records being made public (e.g. US census records), in my experience, it is equally likely that new breakthroughs will come from episodes of *serendipity*.

Serendipity, according to the dictionary, is defined as the accident of finding something good or useful while not specifically searching for it. I have personally been the beneficiary of genealogical serendipity often enough that I devote one of my speaking engagement topics to relating those experiences, including how one serendipitous twist often begets another. By way of illustration, let me tell you about some of those serendipitous sequences of mine. It's a bit of a long and winding tale but since it turns around my treasured *Irish* ancestry, that will seem no surprise and just to be expected by many of you.

In 2010, after more than 30 years of searching for my grandmother Kate's elusive Irish roots, I had finally and indisputably identified Doonflin Upper in County Sligo as the townland where Kate's grandparents, William and Mary Flannelly, had been Catholic tenant farmers in the two decades leading up to the Great Irish Famine. In October 1846, as a second failed potato growing season yielded only black fungus-ridden spuds literally rotting on the vine, William and Mary, like thousands of other Irish, were stripped of both the meager agricultural income that paid the rent on the land they worked and the potato crop that was the mainstay of their daily diet. Ahead of them was another winter without money or food, the threat of spreading illnesses including cholera and violent dysentery, and the prospect of turning to the dreaded public workhouse as a last desperate resort. All over Ireland a large segment of the total population of some 8 million citizens, especially poor Catholics like the Flannellys, long-struggling as the result of religious persecution and economic and political disenfranchisement under the yoke of centuries of British rule, were facing what were literally life and death decisions. The famine years and immediate aftermath would see the Irish population decrease by over 2 million as the result of famine-related death and immigration, never again reaching 8 million to this day.

William and Mary Flannelly chose immigration, making the risky and no doubt heartbreaking decision to leave all that they knew and those that they loved in an effort to save their six surviving children from the very real prospect of eviction, starvation and death. They made their way by crowded, unsanitary ferry to the port of Liverpool and bought passage in steerage on the packet ship *Marmion* bound for New York. (Just three years later, Barack Obama's 19-year-old Irish great-great-great-



*What followed  
was a classic  
Irish adventure  
of triumph and  
tragedy that  
unleashed a  
chain of  
serendipity that  
continued to  
keep on giving  
for months  
thereafter.*

grandfather Falmouth Kearney would travel to America on the *Marmion* following his father to the Midwest where the family had inherited a parcel of land.)

My Flannellys, a family of eight, traveled for weeks in cramped, primitive conditions below deck in the belly of the *Marmion* along with 180 other anxious Irish immigrants, arriving in New York on November 28, 1846. No inheritance of land or family connections awaiting them, they soon settled in Jersey City in the downtown Irish immigrant neighborhood. Like so many immigrants before and after them, the Flannellys were part of the laboring class living in tenements among other expatriates from their homeland. Succeeding Flannelly generations in the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century remained mostly poor, working in menial jobs and scraping by. Despite their struggles as new Americans, their lives here still stood in positive contrast to their lives as farm laborers in Ireland. In America, they were free to practice their Catholic faith and had the opportunity to become fully enfranchised citizens and voters in their adopted country, each of those things a precious gift for those who had long lived without such basic rights.

My beloved grandmother, victim to a cruel death at the hands of Alzheimer's, did not live to see me solve the mystery of her Irish ancestral origins. In January 2010, I published her family story in my book *Past-Forward: a Three-Decade and Three-Thousand Mile Journey Home*. In the throes of the unbridled euphoria of having finally succeeded in keeping the promise I made to my grandmother to find our Irish roots, I sent off an email to the *Sligo Weekender*, a small local Irish newspaper, telling them about my book, the discovery of our Flannelly family connection to their area and my plans to "come home" that summer. No reply came to that email. Six months later in July, I set off on a journey to County Sligo and the unspoiled green fields of Doonflin Upper that my Irish ancestors had rented and farmed over 160 years earlier. What followed was a classic Irish adventure of triumph and tragedy that unleashed a chain of serendipity that continued to keep on giving for months thereafter.

The first week of our two-week stay in Ireland was spent in County Clare where we participated in a world-wide gathering of the Flannery/Flannelly Clan where I met Irish "cousins" from Australia, Northern Ireland, and the U.S., along with native Irish locals. The Clan sponsors a Y-DNA genealogical testing project for males with the Flannery and Flannelly surnames. My family branch was represented in that testing by my mother's second cousin and the test results revealed family connections in the U.S. and Ireland, including some people attending the Clan gathering. Several very enjoyable days were spent sight-seeing, socializing, eating (and drinking) with this great group of people who shared both pride in their Irish heritage and an appetite for



*They had  
graciously  
offered to...help  
me pinpoint  
the land my  
ancestors had  
farmed so long  
ago.*

genealogy and history. We parted with promises to keep in touch and recruit more Flannery and Flannelly members in anticipation of the next gathering.

We traveled north heading for County Sligo and the pilgrimage to the place where my great-great-grandfather was born in 1841 and where his parents had married in 1832. Finally, it was the long-anticipated day when we would visit Doonflin Upper. In researching the area before the trip, I had connected with an American expatriate couple from Chicago who now lived in that very small and sparsely-populated town. They had graciously offered to introduce me to neighbors who had deep roots in Doonflin and would help me pinpoint the land my ancestors had farmed so long ago. To say I was excited can't come close to the elation of realizing a dream of over 30 years.

Having no GPS in our rental car and Doonflin being in a rural area, it didn't take long for us to get turned around and a bit lost. We stopped once, described where we were trying to go, getting directions from a nice gentleman who tried his best to help. (I should mention that once you leave the larger cities in Ireland, you find that street signs are rare in smaller towns and even rarer in the countryside.) We stopped for directions a second time (my idea) at a local home to double-check that we were finally on the right country road. It was drizzling as I strode up a sloped driveway and spoke to a young woman who answered the door and said she believed we were looking for her American neighbors at the top of the hill. I checked my watch, happy to see that we would still be on time. As I came down the steep driveway of the house, I failed to apply the appropriate caution in traversing a metal grate at the foot of the driveway known as a "cattle grate." I took a flyer on the wet metal grate



*So, what I am saying to you is that, if I had the alertness and common sense of a sheep or cow, I might have avoided the flyer.*

genuflecting with all my weight on my right knee and the deed was done. The purpose of a cattle grate is to deter pasture animals (sheep and cows) who are found in the countryside and may wander onto nearby residential yards uninvited. When they put their little hooves on the metal grating, they find an unfamiliar and disconcerting experience, leading them to turn tail and head in another direction. So, what I am saying to you is that, if I had the alertness and common sense of a sheep or cow, I might have avoided the flyer.

My husband, who had been waiting for me in the rental car, heard me calling his name and got out of the car to find me on the ground. The woman who had just minutes before provided directions and her two young daughters quickly came out to help us and covered me with a sheepskin throw. An ambulance was called as I couldn't stand up and was in a good deal of pain. The postman pulled over and offered his assistance as well. The ambulance and paramedics came out from the city and took me to Sligo General Hospital. My paramedics, Stan and John, took very good care of me and I was treated to some much-needed Irish humor on the 30-minute trip to the hospital. I went into "Casualty" (ER) and the nurses and aides were gentle and caring. At the ER, x-rays confirmed the nasty break of my kneecap and the hospital adventure began. I had surgery the following morning and the two pieces of my knee were reconnected with wires and tension banding. My six-day stay in that Irish hospital could be described by borrowing the words of Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*: "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times." I met some wonderful people who took the kindest care of me. Let's not talk about the ruined vacation, pain, groin-to-ankle cast, etc.

While I was in the hospital, I was twice surprised to have visitors. The American ex-pat couple to whose house I was headed when I fell came to the hospital to meet me, bringing gifts. And then there was Regina, the young woman in front of whose house I fell. She came to visit along with her little girls, bringing me Irish chocolates. As we talked, she told me that I was "famous" in her neighborhood and was in the local newspaper. I immediately pictured a headline that said: *Clumsy American Crashes in Doonflin*. Regina saw my face and read my mind.

"No, no," she said. "There was an article about you in last week's *Sligo Weekender* telling how you searched for your Irish roots and were coming home to Sligo to visit. We're trying to find a copy of the paper for you."

I was skeptical and thought perhaps the article was about someone else or there was some other confusion. In September, a few weeks after I made the difficult trip home (in a groin-to-ankle brace and on crutches), the mailman delivered a letter from Regina. Enclosed was a copy of the newspaper article which Regina had gotten by driving a half hour to the offices of the newspaper when she couldn't find anyone who still had the

# US Woman traces her roots to Sligo after thirty year search



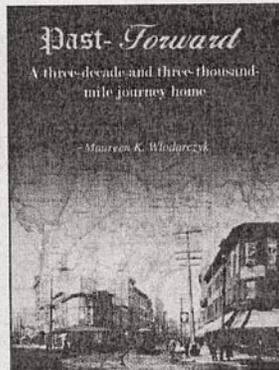
AUTHOR: Keen historian Maureen Włodarczyk and, below, her book.

**A**N American woman has traced her family roots back to Sligo after a 30 year search.

Maureen Włodarczyk from New Jersey has written her family's story and her pursuit of her connections with Ireland in a book entitled "Past-Forward - A three-decade and three-thousand-mile journey home".

Maureen told the Weekender of her long search for her ancestors. She said: "I was motivated to search for my Irish heritage as the result of my deep love and admiration for my grandmother Kate. Unfortunately for my grandmother, she lost her mother Mamie Flannelly Whalen at a young age and so lost any connection to her heritage during a resulting tough and oft sad disrupted childhood."

But after over three decades of research, Maureen discovered that her great-great-great-grandfather was



William Flannelly of Doonfin Upper, Skreen.

"He was born in about 1800 and married Mary Lang of County Cavan at Skreen Parish in March 1832.

She said that in 1846 as the Famine intensified, William and Mary Flannelly and their six surviving children made their way to Liverpool and then sailed to New York.

"One of those children, my great-great-grandfather John J. Flannelly (five years old at the time of their flight from Ireland) would grow up to serve in the Union army during the Civil War, incited to join by the promise of a \$100 bounty payment for his service, an amount I am sure seemed a fortune to their modest family."

She said that her grandmother was placed as a live-in domestic servant for a politically-connected family in Jersey City at the age of 13. By the age of 16,

she married.

"She became a devoted mother of six, grandmother of thirteen and great-grandmother as well. She and I were very, very close... like girlfriends. She was stricken with Alzheimer's and did not live to see me discover the story of our Irish roots but I wrote and recently published the story in a book titled "Past-Forward", written in the form of a letter to her and telling her our family story."

Later this month Maureen is coming to Ireland and said that she will be making her way to Doonfin Upper to "step foot on the very property where my great-great-great-grandfather William Flannelly farmed nearly 165 years ago".

"It is incredibly important to me that the story of my family be read. It is an Irish story, an American immigrant story."

paper. The article was essentially the text of the email I had sent to the *Sligo Weekender* and it was amazing to see it in print. So, as I often say, if I hadn't taken a fall in just the right place, I never would have known my family story made the newspapers in the old neighborhood! Serendipity can be bittersweet.

Several weeks later, while still on crutches and struggling with my injured knee, my husband encouraged me not to forego attending the Hudson County History Fair in Jersey City. I had been invited to sit at a table for local authors writing about Hudson County-related topics. I was reluctant but ultimately decided to go, even if I couldn't stay long. As it turned out, one of the speakers scheduled to do a talk at the fair did not arrive. I stepped in (well, more like "hopped in" on my crutches) and spoke to a group of some 70 people about genealogical research. I spoke about the search for my grandmother's Irish roots and mentioned names and local places connected to that search and concluded with some Q&A.

Among the questions was one from a woman who asked about the family for whom my grandmother was a teenage domestic servant in

**Row Caused by Beer.** 7-7-1882

Delia Flannelly and her husband and children left their home, corner of Coles and Wayne streets, last night, to go and see the fireworks. They went, and on the way back stepped into a saloon kept by the nephew of Mrs. Flannelly, corner of Grove and Eighth streets. There the aunt and nephew got into a row over a glass of beer, and both soon found themselves in the station house. Mrs. Flannelly was given the privilege of going home, but foolishly got ugly instead, and was so disorderly that Sergt. Heath locked her up.

Jersey City Heights during the World War I era. She also told the group about GenealogyBank, the on-line newspaper archive, and that site's collection of early Jersey City newspapers. When I had hobbled back to the author's table and sat down, she reappeared there and bought three copies of my book *Past-Forward*. Serendipity set in as she told me that she was a relation of the family for whom my grandmother had been in domestic service over 90 years ago. Tears nearly set in when she said she hoped that the family had treated my grandmother decently when she was in their employ. It soon occurred to me that if my husband had not encouraged me to attend the fair, I would not have been there to fill in for the absent speaker. If I had not been a last minute replacement for that speaker, I never would have crossed paths with her and we would never have discovered our personal family connection. But, it gets even better! She encouraged me to try GenealogyBank and, within 24 hours, I had signed up for a free trial subscription. Within days after that, I had unearthed references to my Jersey City Flannelly family going back to 1869, some of them involving a bit too much imbibing followed by brawling, including one involving my Irish-born great-great-grandmother Delia Flannelly.

In 1862 Delia, then 13-years-old, had traveled alone to America seeking a position as a "housemaid," and, knowing that, I had concluded that she must have been a strong, independent young woman. She gave birth to 10 children over 17 years, 8 of them surviving infancy. Yep, strong woman all right. The GenealogyBank article from July, 1882 was titled "*Row Caused by Beer*." The short piece described an altercation in a saloon that took place as Delia, her husband and their children were returning home from the Jersey City July 4th fireworks. The Flannellys "stepped into" a saloon where their nephew was bartender and soon after, Delia and the nephew got into a disagreement over a glass of beer and "both soon found themselves in the (police) station house." Delia was offered the "privilege" of going home but "got ugly" instead and was "so disorderly" that the Sergeant locked her up overnight. Not a word is said about my great-great-grandfather who I have to assume gathered up the children and went home.

GenealogyBank would yield articles referencing multiple generations of my Jersey City Flannelly family over a thirty-year period, each of those (whether laudatory or not) a treasured discovery that permitted me to reconstruct a more personal and richer view of the Irish family history that means so much to me . . . all that flowing forth from a chance opportunity to be a substitute speaker and talk about the dear grandmother who inspired my insatiable appetite for family history research. I'll have mine with a side of serendipity please. 

# The Genealogical Society of New Jersey

**GSNJ is a non-profit organization dedicated to procuring, preserving and publishing information on New Jersey families.**

Membership includes subscriptions to the Genealogical Magazine of New Jersey, published three times a year, and the GSNJ Newsletter, published quarterly. Queries in the GSNJ Newsletter are free to members. We offer discounts on society publications, educational seminars; and more to our members. Individual Dues: \$40; Library, Archive or Society subscriptions also available.

For a brochure & application send an SASE to:  
GSNJ Membership Services  
Attention: G. S. Lowry  
PO Box 1476  
Trenton NJ 08607-1476

**For more information – please visit our website: [www.gsnj.org](http://www.gsnj.org)**

