



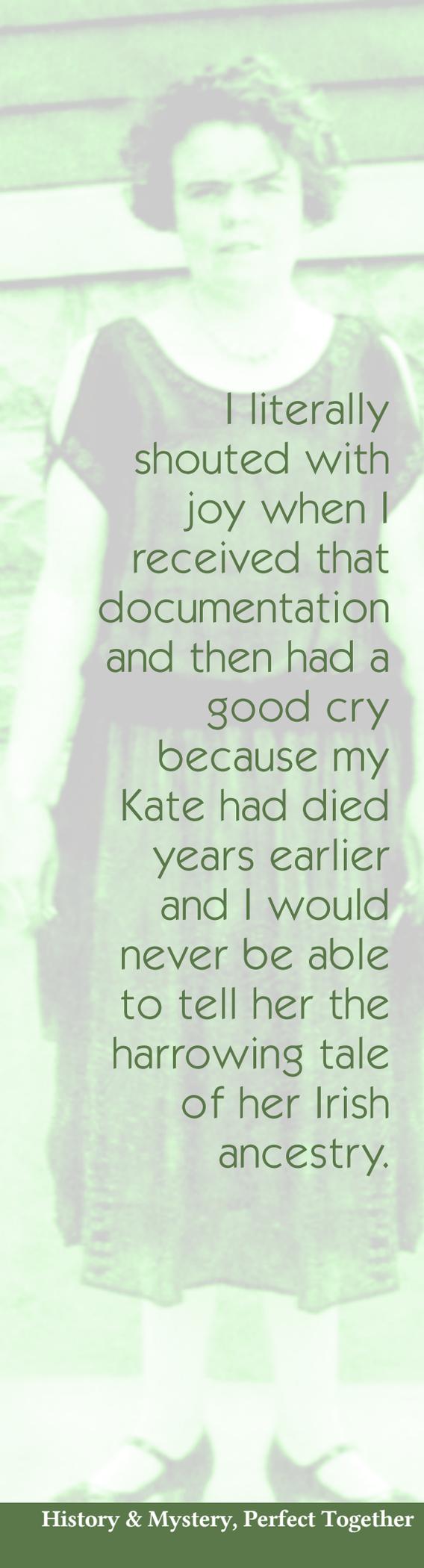
Genealogy isn't
just about
finding dead
ancestors.

Kate Whalen

Genealogy is generally defined as a noun meaning either a record of a person's descent from their ancestors or the study or investigation of ancestry or family history. In my opinion, that definition, while accurate in describing the process and objective of genealogy, is incomplete. The definition of genealogy should also include "an activity by means of which previously unknown living family members are discovered." Whether a result of DNA testing, traditional genealogical bush-beating or some serendipitous sequence of events, searching for our dead quite often leads to the living and the gift of an extended family.

In my genealogical searching on behalf of others, I have had the opportunity to connect friends and clients with new-found living relatives, a thoroughly satisfying and often exciting experience. In one case, searching for a friend's roots, my research led me to a man with the same surname that clearly appeared to be descended of the same old Scottish line. While I was happily thinking what that gentleman could bring to my friend's knowledge of his family history, he was, it turned out, thinking that my friend was the answer to his DNA-testing dilemma. Although born and raised with the same surname as my friend, he was actually descended of an unmarried woman who gave her children her surname rather than that of their biological father. That meant the woman's male descendants did not inherit the YDNA needed to tie them back to that surname—but my friend did. After some initial contact, my friend's new relations offered to pay for the YDNA test if my friend would participate. He agreed and both families shared in the results that confirmed their Scotland origins and immigrant history in southern Appalachia.

Recently, I was able to reconnect two family lines (one American and one Canadian), each of those families descended of an Irish immigrant orphan, one male and the other female, who had survived an ill-fated voyage to Quebec in 1847 during the Great Famine in Ireland, but lost their parents and siblings to shipboard disease during the Atlantic crossing. In fact, rather than being the only survivors of their respective families, it was discovered that those two orphans were brother and sister, taken in by different local Quebec families who provided for them when they lost their parents. Their physical separation unintentionally



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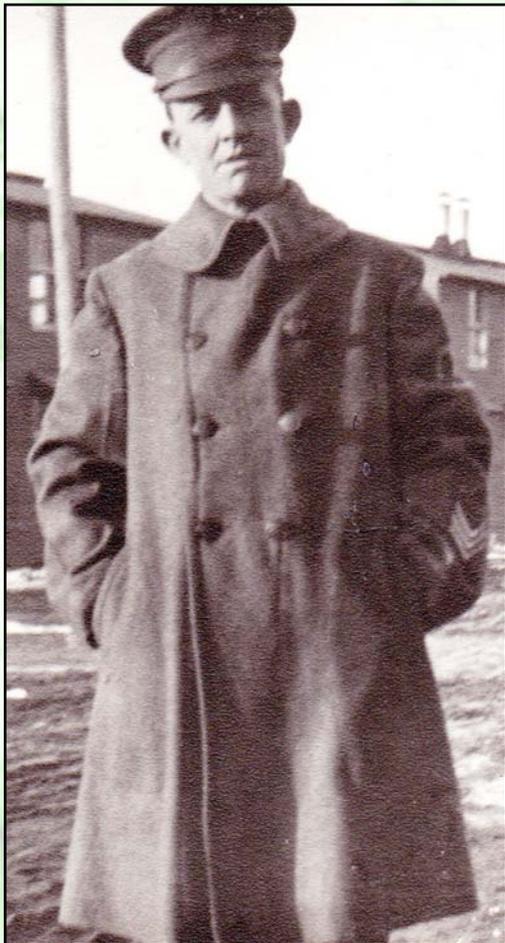
led to a multi-generational family fracture that left their respective descendants unaware of each other for over 165 years. Only due to the interest of members of each family in genealogy was the door opened for a serendipitous reconnection and the surprising discovery that each of their orphaned ancestors had a sibling who had also survived the trip to North America.

Sometimes the discovery of living family simply means the chance to share knowledge and documentation that enhances the understanding of mutual family history. Sometimes it means the long sought-after answer to a special genealogical “wish-list” item. Beyond even that, it may present the opportunity to meet and get to know new extended family members with whom we “click” and who remain in our lives making the definition of “family” richer for us and for them. In the case of my personal genealogical journey, it has meant all three of those things.

After thirty years of searching for my beloved grandmother Kate’s elusive Irish ancestry, a journey punctuated with small successes, great gaps between discoveries, and figurative skinned knees from doing battle with “brick walls” that threatened to prevent me from ever reconnecting my family back to Ireland, the pieces finally came together about seven years ago. My Kate was the granddaughter of Famine emigrant John J. Flannelly from Doonflin Upper in County Sligo who arrived in America in late 1846 as a red-haired five-year-old traveling in steerage with his tenant-farmer parents and siblings. The Sligo Heritage Centre provided me with confirmation in the form of an 1841 birth record for John and an 1832 marriage record for his parents William and Mary (nee Lang) Flannelly. I literally shouted with joy when I received that documentation and then had a good cry because my Kate had died years earlier and I would never be able to tell her the harrowing tale of her Irish ancestry.

You might think I would have taken a deep breath and savored my triumph after three decades of struggle that included episodes when I had almost fallen victim to the whispering voice inside my head that said “you’ll *never* figure it out.” Those of you for whom genealogy is a “calling” will know better. My mission entered an unplanned phase two: leveraging the now-known facts of my Irish family story to learn even more—to put some meat on that family skeleton and add more leaves to that gnarly family tree. Ancestry.com public family tree postings would figure prominently in my phase two journey and multiple discoveries of real flesh and blood relatives over a period of five years.

In late 2007, full of renewed genealogical zeal after my long-awaited first trip to Ireland, I was back on Ancestry searching for



Patrick Whalen c.1920

further signs of my Flannelly family roots. I came upon a family tree posting that included some names and dates that looked familiar. After a longer look, I spotted a name that I was sure I recognized as my grandmother Kate's Aunt Minnie. Using Ancestry's member contact function, I reached out to the owner of that family tree. I received a response and in the communication that followed, I explained who I was and the family connection I suspected. We confirmed that connection when I asked if Minnie had a disability. The answer: "yes." I said that my orphaned grandmother told me about her kind Aunt Minnie who always wore an apron with a pocket where she concealed one of her hands. That did it. Their Minnie and my Minnie were one in the same. I invited them to visit my home and they accepted not long after. They had found another Flannelly relation on Ancestry and I extended the invitation to that person as well. One Saturday winter morning, I opened my front door to welcome five strangers bearing gifts in the form of family documents and photos. By the end of the day, they were transformed into my new-found Flannelly family. One of them subsequently agreed to do YDNA testing on behalf of our Flannelly line that allowed us to discover our earliest Irish roots in County Mayo.

In early 2010 just after the publication of my first book *Past-Forward*, the story of the search for my grandmother's Irish ancestral roots, I once again found a family tree on Ancestry that had a connection to my own. The tree included my grandmother Kate thus making it absolutely irresistible. Once again I initiated contact with the tree owner through Ancestry. Once again a response was quickly received and communication continued as we brought context to our family relationship and began sharing family stories. This time the tree owner turned out to be the grandson of my grandmother Kate's half-brother (he and I share the same great-grandmother—my Kate's mother.) This exchange of information included me sharing some sad and poignant (and a bit shocking) family history with my newly-discovered second cousin. After that, we arranged to meet at a book-signing I was doing at the Jersey City Public Library. Once again a door opened, this time in the New Jersey Room at the Library, and again I had the biggest smile on my face as I greeted my new family.

Last year, I was again the beneficiary of Ancestry family tree good fortune but not as the result of my own digging. I received a message through Ancestry asking if I was the "author and blogger researching the Flannellys." The message was from a genealogical researcher helping her friend search for her Irish roots. That friend, Tish Brennan, the great-granddaughter of Anna Flannelly and John Brown, would turn out to be the key to realizing the long-standing

number one item on my genealogical wish list.

More than once, when speaking to groups about genealogy research and describing the elation of finally solving the mystery of my grandmother's ancestry, I had been asked if there was "anything else" left for me to find out. In answering "yes," I always mentioned the hope of connecting with a descendant of my grandmother's Italian-born uncle: John Bruno—Anglicized as "Brown." John Brown, born in 1872 in Italy, arrived in America in the early 1890s. He married Anna Flannelly in Jersey City in 1899. Anna was my great-grandmother Mamie Flannelly's older and only sister and, by all appearances, the sisters were very close, having lost their parents in their teen years. Mamie married Patrick Whalen in Jersey City in 1901 and the sisters, their husbands, and children lived together for most of the first decade of the 1900s. Among those children were first cousins Kate Whalen, my grandmother, and Rosetta Brown, Tish Brennan's grandmother.

The lives of the Flannelly sisters and their families would be touched by repetitive tragedy beginning in 1908 when the Browns lost their baby daughter Margaret. Just a year later, Anna Flannelly Brown fell ill with tuberculosis and died, leaving her husband John Brown and three surviving children. It is likely that my great-grandmother Mamie nursed her sister during her illness and provided care to Anna's children. At the same time, she was dealing with an alcoholic husband and caring for her own five children. Several years later, Mamie was also stricken with tuberculosis and just weeks after her 35th birthday, she also died. Mamie's ne'er-do-well husband (my great-grandfather Patrick Whalen) was not the one who saw to Mamie's burial—it was her brother-in-law John Brown who laid her to rest in the same plot with her sister Anna.

John Brown assumed responsibility for his Whalen nieces and nephews, including my grandmother, because their own father was either unable or unwilling to do so and he tried to keep his extended family together as a single parent. Unfortunately, tragedy came calling again in late 1914 when my grandmother's 5-year-old sister Mary was burned to death in an accident. Once again, it was John Brown who arranged for the burial and laid his niece to rest with her mother. After that, the Whalen children were split up and my grandmother was sent to other relatives, ultimately running away and becoming a live-in domestic servant by the age of thirteen.

Some sixty years later, my grandmother found the strength to tell me about her sad childhood, her father's abandonment and her Italian uncle John Brown who tried to keep the family together after the death of the Flannelly sisters. From that knowledge came my wish



John Brown



that I would someday find a descendant of John Brown, learn more about him, share my discoveries about our family history, and perhaps even see a photo of the man who was a hero in my eyes.

I connected with John Brown's great-granddaughter Tish and her sister Maggie and met them in Jersey City in August 2012. We had an almost immediate rapport and were soon talking and sharing family stories as though we had known each other for years. I told them about our gratitude to John Brown for what he had done for my grandmother and her siblings after their mother's death and mentioned that we would so like to see a photo of him. Not long after that meeting, my wish was realized as I studied a photo of a young, handsome John Brown on horseback and, to my delight, realized that I was seeing him as my grandmother and her siblings would have remembered him.

The discovery of these living Flannelly descendants has meant the opportunity to enhance and add context to our collective history, feed our growing family tree and build bonds with real flesh-and-blood family—not to mention the chance for me to move a new item to the top of my genealogical wish-list.



Rosetta Brown