

What's in a Name?

Finding Frances Kelly

There is a Chinese proverb that says “*the beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names.*” The community of family history researchers and enthusiasts knows that only too well as every new genealogical search begins with charting out the names of our ancestors. Those names are the bones of the skeleton of our family history. Reconnecting them and then using research results to add meat to our family story breathes life and adds dimension to what started as a flat chart of generations. Almost all genealogy researchers, hobbyist or professional, have fallen prey to challenges and quagmires related to those family names.

Name problems come in an array of forms. Among the most basic is the *correct* spelling of a surname, problem being that the “correct” spelling may have changed or been misconstrued over the years. Spelling issues are also often compounded in census records due to language barriers and illiteracy. Adding to that are indexing errors resulting from the challenge of deciphering early handwriting on census and other key records available on websites like Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org. Seasoned genealogy researchers become adept at amassing a search list based on pronunciation, possible alternate spellings and related root names. (Think: McElroy, MacLeroy, McIlroy or Livingston, Levingston, Livingstone)

Even with significant experience to apply to dealing with the above roadblocks, each case is unique and calls for persistence and ingenuity—and a wee bit of luck can't hurt either. Then there are the hurdles stemming from the use of nicknames or middle names as first names. Some nicknames are pretty straightforward: *Betsy* or *Betty* instead of Elizabeth. Other first name substitutions bear no readily explainable reasoning: *James* or *Jimmy* for the name Vincenzo, which I have seen more than once in Italian

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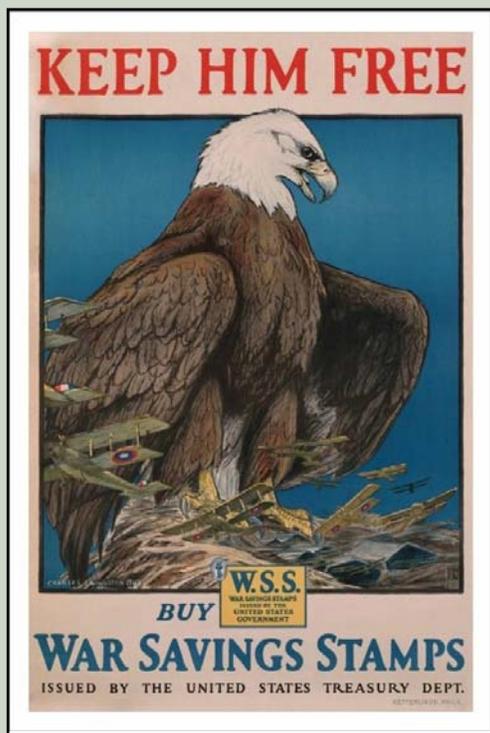
immigrant families. And, of course, there are the instances where the use of a person's nickname versus their given name is inconsistent. In one decade Vincenzo is Vincenzo and, the next, he is Jimmy.

Genealogists have a special affection for unusual names, both first and last. It is a mercy when a person has an uncommon first name, especially if their last name is not. The first name Mary, which often morphs to (and from) Marie and Maria, with its ages-old biblical connection to Jesus's mother is a perfect example of what a researcher dreads. In doing research on a large group of Italian families recently, I was awash in Marias and Giuseppes (Josephs), the result of their Catholic faith and Italian generational naming traditions. In my own Irish family research, after months of searching for ship passenger records using every kind of surname variation I could imagine, I changed strategy and decided to search specifically for one child who would have been with the family and had a more uncommon name (Owen) than the others who were William, Mary, John, Michael, etc. A few more hours of searching using Owen's name and various bastardized versions of the family surname (Flannelly) and I had my breakthrough. The family was all there, under "Hennelly." (No doubt the indexer mistook the fancy-topped "F" next to a lower case "l" for an "H.")

Ancestry.com and other genealogy research sites provide tools that assist with the alternate/variable name search strategy such as using an "*" in place of a letter (or several letters) to prompt the search engine to bring up more possibilities. I use that tool all the time. Some sites also employ "sounds like" options as part of their search criteria. That can also be very useful. Since different sites offer different tools, if you strike out with one, try another. Also, different sites will likely have used different people as indexers. So, had I been lucky, my "Hennellys" on Ancestry might have been "Flannellys" on another site. In doing research for clients, I have found census records through FamilySearch that did not come up using the same search criteria on Ancestry. Like



FRANCES KELLY.

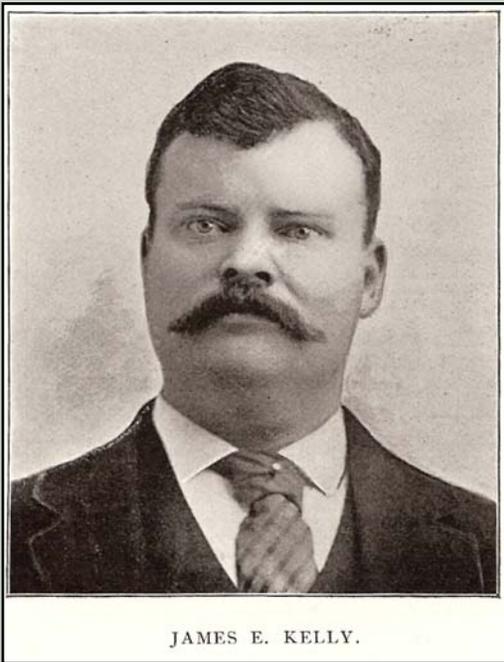


most genealogists, I'll take my information wherever I can find it and I am grateful to those who have invested so much time and effort in indexing millions of records so that others can find and use them.

With the above in mind, let me share a story about a name revelation that came to light in some recent research. As usual, I was on the hunt for an entertaining or interesting old Jersey story of the past that was long since forgotten but worthy of resurrection. I often find these little gems by perusing newspaper archives on-line and then expand the story by doing some genealogical research on the party (or parties) in the newspaper story. That, to me, brings context and dimension to the original newspaper story of a century or more ago and allows my readers to get to "know" the subject of the tale I am retelling.

While surfing the New Jersey newspaper archive available on GenealogyBank.com, I discovered Miss Frances Kelly of Jersey City. During World War I, Miss Kelly had undertaken a mission to promote the sale of War Saving Stamps (WSS) by traversing New Jersey on horseback. She set off from Jersey City in May 1918. Her journey and escalating bond sales totals were regularly chronicled in newspapers across our state. Sales were spurred on as towns became rivals vying to beat the competition in generating WSS sales and pledges. It was reported that Frances Kelly traveled over 1,800 miles crisscrossing New Jersey on horseback and raised in excess of \$300,000 in WSS sales. During her equestrian campaign she was welcomed at military facilities like Camp Raritan, was surrounded by eager politicians around the state and received honorary memberships in many fraternal organizations and police departments. From Atlantic City to Keyport, South Amboy to Trenton, Lambertville, and beyond, crowds came out to welcome her, hear her speak and support our military.

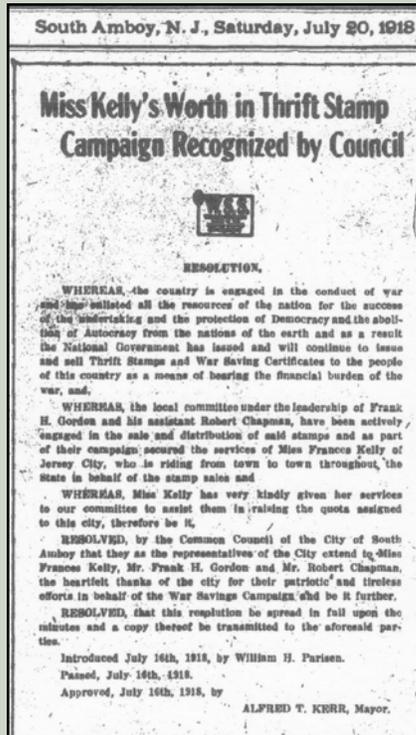
In July 1918, while she was addressing a rally in Farmingdale, a fire broke out in a shop near the scene of that



Courtesy of the New Jersey Room,
Jersey City Free Public Library

gathering. The *Jersey Journal* gave the following account of what happened next: “as the flames began to lap up everything within reach . . . Miss Kelly and Police Lieutenant Buckbee of Jersey City, detailed to act as escort for Miss Kelly on her tour of the State . . . organized an impromptu fire department . . . getting the locals to carry water (in buckets) and pour it on the fire. Miss Kelly telephoned to Freehold and got the fire department there to drum up help for Farmingdale. In the meantime Miss Kelly helped to save the Presbyterian Church from the flames, and after Lt. Buckbee had organized his bucket brigade, the spread of the flames was also prevented. Miss Kelly was cut by breaking glass and had to be given medical attention before she was able to resume her campaign.” The newspaper article concluded that Kelly and Buckbee’s heroism would likely result in “larger returns for the balance of her tour” in that area.

Although she achieved fame and accolades as Miss Frances Kelly, she was not only known by that name. Prior to her WSS fundraising efforts, she had a local stage career and performed with a traveling troupe under the professional name Frances Carroll. Neither of those surnames was the one Frances was given at birth. This patriotic young lady, born in 1898, was the daughter of James McMahan and his wife Caroline Stein who operated a florist shop in downtown Jersey City at the turn of the 20th century. James McMahan died at a young age not long after his family was recorded in the 1900 U.S. census. Caroline McMahan continued to operate the flower shop after the death of her husband. Sometime later, Jersey City’s former Police Commissioner James E. Kelly, first generation Irish-American, came to the shop to order a funeral arrangement and, according to the *Jersey Journal*, was immediately smitten with the young widow. A romance followed and the two married in 1908 when Frances McMahan was 10 years old. James Kelly was then the long-time owner of a saloon at the corner of Newark Avenue and Grove Street in Jersey City. And so, Frances *McMahan* became Frances *Kelly*, taking her stepfather’s surname.



Tragedy struck Caroline McMahon Kelly and her daughter Frances once again in March 1915 when James Kelly died at their Wayne Street home. Contributing to and compounding their loss were financial problems that had beset James Kelly and had recently culminated in him losing his saloon. Newspapers reported that Kelly had succumbed to "hemorrhages brought about by a weakened constitution and worry over his business troubles."

Four years after his death and not long after Frances Kelly had completed her successful WSS fundraising campaign, Caroline Kelly launched a new flower shop at 498 Jersey Avenue. A July 1919 newspaper ad announced the shop's opening and stated that "Miss Frances Kelly, the well-known Thrift Stamp Girl, will assist her mother in the business." Frances also continued her local theatrical career into the early 1920s.

Caroline and her daughter Frances, known by different names as their life fortunes changed, persevered and weathered the tragic losses that came their way. So, while interesting, that first article I read about Frances Kelly, the horseback promoter of WSS sales, had given me no real inkling of the full story of a young woman who had experienced so much in the first 20 years of her life. To quote Benjamin Franklin: "What does it signify to know the names, if you do not know the nature?"



*"Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains
as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge
hidden in every cell of our bodies."*

— Shirley Abbott

Maureen Wlodarczyk

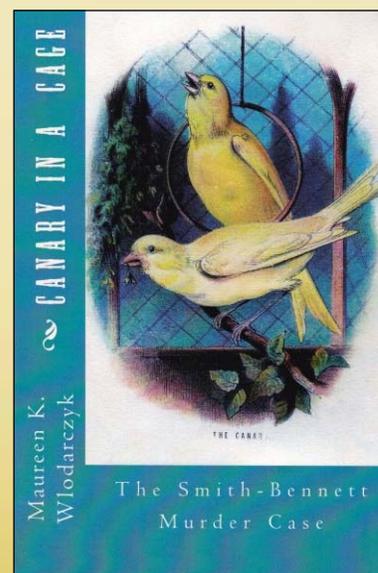
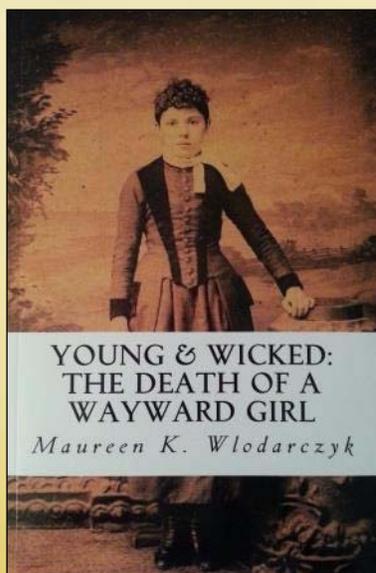
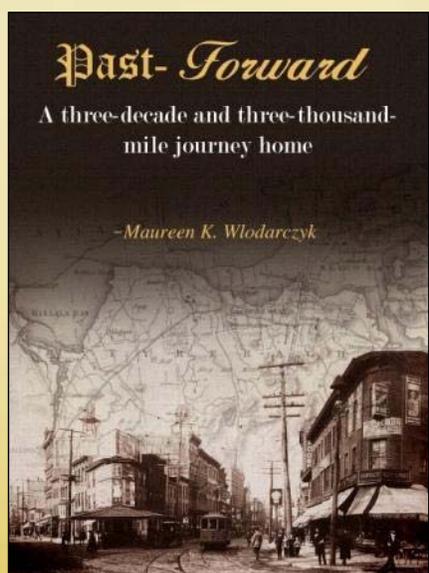
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