

## Genealogy: It's not a tree or a chart...it's a *story!*

When I begin a new genealogical research project for a client, I gather all the family data the client can provide and open an Excel family tree template and input the basic descendancy information. That is my first step in the process of discovering the client's ancestral roots. In doing research for clients, in addition to providing a descendancy chart and backup documentation (vital, military, ship passenger and census records, etc. along with any newspaper references I find), my last step is to create a written narrative of each generation that represents a consolidation of the chart and that documentation. My objective is to provide clients with a basic readable recounting of their ancestors rather than handing them just a binder chock full of orderly documentation and leaving them to their own devices. When I go through the binder with them and explain the narrative, I tell them that there is more *they* can do to enrich their family saga. I encourage them to take their family story to the next level by learning more about the times in which each generation lived.

To me, as important as a family tree chart is and notwithstanding the fact that it is a core element of illustrating and memorializing one's ancestry, it is wholly insufficient to convey the multi-dimensional story of the generations whose lives paved the way for our own existence. Getting from family tree chart to a rich, resonant family story means using the chart as a skeleton, fleshing it out and breathing life into it by researching the greater history of the times, places and circumstances that defined the lives of each generation. Let's use my own family to illustrate my point.

Following is an excerpt from my Irish family tree chart. It depicts my beloved grandmother Catherine Whalen, her parents Mamie Flannelly and Patrick Whalen and her maternal grandparents John Flannelly and Delia Hough who lived in Jersey City in the latter decades of the 1800s and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Patrick Whalen 1881-1935 NJ/NJ

Catherine Whalen 1904-1988 NJ/NJ

John Flannelly 1841-1894 IRE/NJ

Mamie Flannelly 1878-1913 NJ/NJ

Delia Hough 1849-1890 IRE/NJ

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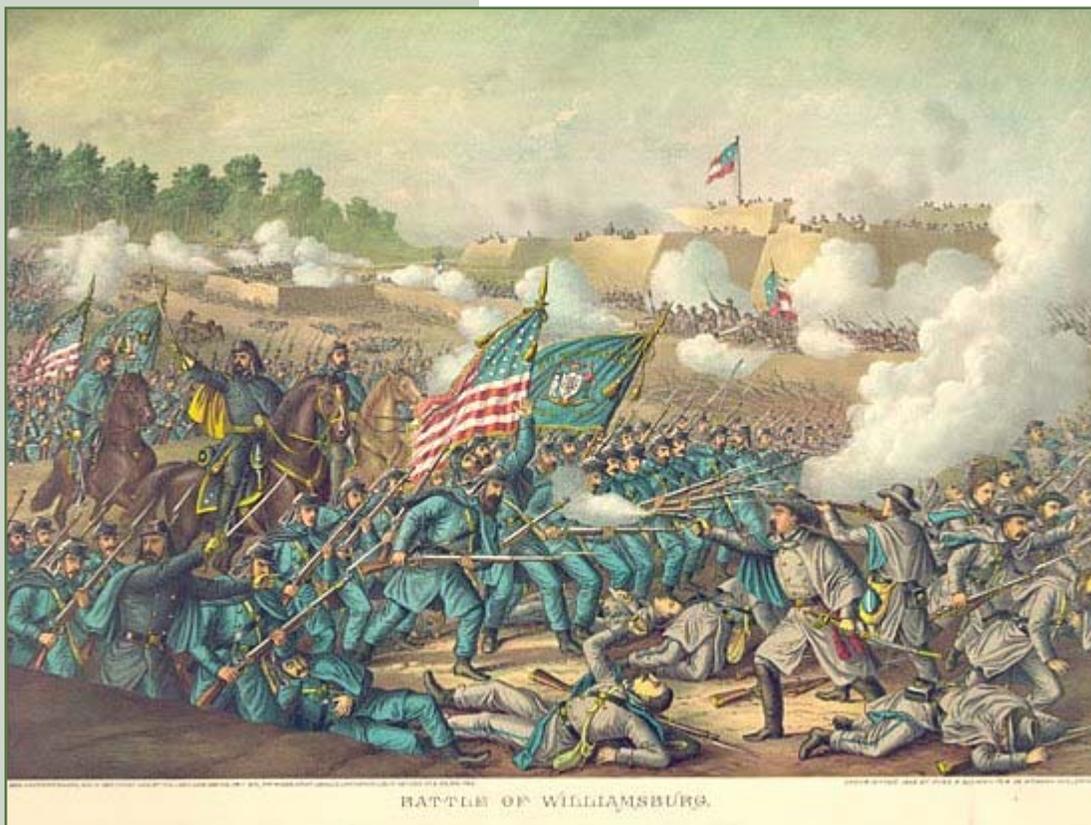
The chart tells us that my grandmother was born in 1904 in New Jersey to Irish-American parents also born in New Jersey and that she was the maternal granddaughter of Irish immigrants who must have arrived in New Jersey in the third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Time to take that skeletal description and add historical, economic, geographical, political, and social context. Over many years, as I discovered new documentation confirming immigration, birth, death and marriage information, and census records that revealed the streets where they lived and their occupations, I also began researching what was happening in the world and locally during their lifetimes.

John Flannelly arrived in America at age 5 in 1846. He was traveling by ship in steerage with his parents and five siblings. The Flannelly family were refugees fleeing the Great Famine in their Irish homeland. I read about the desperate starving times in Ireland that compelled over a million Irish to abandon their beloved homeland and launched the worldwide Irish diaspora. Then I read about the deplorable conditions immigrants like my Flannellys endured while traveling weeks in the belly of sailing ships along with two or three hundred others like themselves. Men, women and children crowded together with no personal space or privacy and without even the most basic sanitary precautions. In an environment of spreading disease and the stench resulting from human waste and retching, they tried to retreat into sleep amid the cries and moans of many of those around them. They wondered if they would live to see America and prayed that their new lives and their children's would be

better. That research and knowledge began the process of turning my great-great-grandfather John Flannelly from a name to an image . . . a person. In my mind's eye, I see a little boy

climbing up out of the belly of a ship on a late November day, holding hands with his siblings. The weather is much colder than his Irish homeland and after weeks of seeing only with the aid of sparse light from a few lanterns, he has to squint and shield his eyes from the sudden full daylight.

Little John Flannelly would grow up in Jersey City and,



John Flannelly was among the Union wounded at the Battle of Williamsburg on May 5, 1862.

at the age of 19, enlisted in the 6<sup>th</sup> New Jersey Volunteers at the outbreak of the Civil War in response to the promise of a \$100 sign-on bonus. Not long after, in early 1862, he and his unit arrived in Tidewater Virginia to become part of a march from Yorktown north, the mission being to push Confederate troops back to Richmond. Once again I hit the books (and the web), this time to find out about the 6<sup>th</sup> New Jersey Volunteers and the Virginia Peninsular Campaign of early 1862. I found a 1997 book titled *A Pitiless Rain*<sup>1</sup> that described the conditions and struggles encountered by Union troops as they moved north during days of driving rain. Battling Confederate forces as they trudged through mud up to their calves, the campaign would culminate in the Battle of Williamsburg on May 5, 1862. John was among many Union soldiers sent to field hospitals after the battle, some falling in combat and others stricken with illness including malaria. John survived the war and came home to Jersey City after the

expiration of his 3-year enlistment. He married another Irish immigrant, Delia (proper name Bridget) Hough in 1867. John and Delia Flannelly had 8 children that survived infancy: 6 boys and 2 girls. One of those girls was my great-grandmother Mamie (proper name Mary Agnes) Flannelly, born in 1878 in Jersey City.



This postcard looks west along Jersey City's Newark Avenue.

I wondered what it was like to be an Irish immigrant in Jersey City's downtown Irish neighborhood in the years between 1850 and 1900. I wanted to understand the urban environment, economic conditions for unskilled laborers like my ancestors, the political climate for immigrants and any issues related to my ancestors' Catholic faith. I located books and articles on Jersey City history that shed a great deal of light on those topics. I was also able to find two theses written specifically on topics related to education (public and parochial) and immigrant life in Jersey City in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2,3</sup> I then understood that Irish immigrants like mine in Jersey City faced discrimination related to both their immigrant origins and their Catholic faith. I learned about their slow and steady efforts to assimilate and to build their political influence by consolidating with their fellow Irish immigrants. I also understood the life of a perpetual "laborer" like my Flannelly great-great-grandfather: back-breaking work without even the smallest vestige of job security and living from hand-to-mouth in tenements with no indoor plumbing. Perhaps they could have done better for themselves. Perhaps not. Either way, I had a clear understanding of their daily lives. They were "alive" in my imagination.

By early 1894, when my great-grandmother Mamie Flannelly was 15, both of her parents were dead, buried in Holy Name Cemetery in Jersey City. Four years later, Mamie was working at the large commercial Manhattan Laundry in Jersey City. An on-line newspaper archive search unearthed an article mentioning that Mamie and her date led the opening dance at the annual laundry workers dance held in Jersey City in February 1898. I pictured my red-haired great-grandmother getting ready for the dance and pinning up her copper tresses. How proud she must

## LAUNDRY EMPLOYEES DANCE.

Successful Ball at Columbia Hall  
Last Evening.

The second annual ball of the Manhattan Laundry Employees' Association attracted over five hundred young people to Columbia Hall, Greenville, last evening. The majority of the participants came from the lower sections of the city.

The opening march was led by President John Nangle and Miss Mamie Flannelly. Mr. H. M. Payette was floor manager and Mr. F. W. Bluecher assistant floor manager. They were assisted by the following committees: Floor, George Brighton, Edward Datz, E. Valentine; reception, J. Rehill, chairman; W. Attwell, J. Speer, J. Brown, W. Earl.

Among the guests were: Misses Leonard, Dollman, Meehan, Fox, Ruff, Chilver, Stinley, Hagens, Collman, Gallagher, Russ, Mahon, Quinn, Wahl, Richards, Bold, Farley, Barry, Sheehan, Walsh, A. Flannelly, M. Gordon, M. Hoyt, M. Nennhoff, Regan, Reilly, Wall, Meehe, Markey, R. Atkinson, Kennedy, Edwards, Bradley, Doody, Coreon, McGuir, M. and L. Nisbank, Atkins, Carhart, Mr. and Mrs. Brighton, Mrs. Bary, Mr. and Mrs. Roselbower, Mr. and Mrs. Myerhoff, Messrs. H. Meehan, McNulty, McGuir, Cahinn, Donnelly, O'Connors, Montano, C. L. Muller, W. Muller, Simon and H. Atkinson.



Patrick Whalen, c.1920

have been to have the honor of opening the dance with her "fellow." But, Mamie's special day would soon be a fleeting memory. Eight months later, she became an unwed mother, giving birth to a son fathered by the same "fellow" who whirled her around the dance floor just months before. No marriage resulted and when the census-taker came two years later in 1900, Mamie and her illegitimate son were recorded as boarding house tenants and she gave her occupation as an "ironer" at a laundry. This information evoked the image of a young woman who, in the eyes of her laundry co-workers, went from being the center of attention at the dance to the shame of being a fallen woman.

Mamie's trials were not over, however. She would marry, probably on the rebound, a year after that census was taken. Her new husband Patrick Whalen would soon prove to be an alcoholic. She gave birth to four children with him, including my dear grandmother Catherine Whalen in 1904 in Jersey City. She

remained close to her only sister, Anna. When Anna was stricken with tuberculosis, Mamie nursed her until her death and became surrogate mother to her sister's children. Sadly, Mamie contracted tuberculosis herself, perhaps as the result of caring for her sister. Mamie died a few years later in 1913 in Jersey City just weeks after her 35<sup>th</sup> birthday. The deaths of the two sisters ultimately left 9 motherless children. The neighborhood doctor who delivered my grandmother into the world and later treated her mother's tuberculosis also fell victim to that disease, losing his own life some years later.

Realizing the tragic effect that the tuberculosis scourge had on my family and so many others, I read up on the history of tuberculosis in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Particularly devastating in urban environments where people lived and worked in close contact, it was called a "plague" and decades went by before effective treatment was developed. It was painfully evident to me what tuberculosis had done to



Catherine Whalen, c.1922

my family and how it had literally ended my grandmother Catherine's childhood. When Catherine's mother Mamie died, Catherine was 9. Despite her father's drinking and unreliability, while her mother was alive, she and her siblings had attended school and their mother did her best to care for them and maintain stability in the home. Once Mamie died, her husband refused to assume responsibility for their children and my grandmother and her siblings were divided among relatives. My grandmother never went back to school and, by the age of 13, she was put into live-in domestic service in Jersey City. By 16, she was married. Thankfully, that marriage would finally mean the return of love and stability in her life and resulted in a happy union of over 50 years, 6 children, 13 grandchildren and great-grandchildren during her lifetime.

Now take another look at that chart above that illustrates my Irish maternal ancestry. What a difference some additional historical research can make when documenting a family history! It is highly unlikely that you will be able to recall much, if any, of the basic information in the small, simple chart above in coming days. It is very possible that you will instead retain some memory of the *people* listed there as the result of my having put their lives in context. People often tell me that they want to write their family story and ask how they can present it so that it will be of interest to others, including younger family members. Take that family tree chart of yours and give it CPR by researching and layering on historical context. In that way you will truly get to know your dear departed and they will be alive again in your imagination and that of others who read their story.



#### Endnotes:

- 1 Hastings, Earl C. and David S. Hastings. *A Pitiless Rain*. Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing Co., 1997.
- 2 Petrick, Barbara Burns. *Church and School in the Immigrant City 1830–1930*. Dissertation Abstract: 1995.
- 3 Shaw, Douglas V. *The Making of an Immigrant City*. New York: Arno Press, 1976.

*"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

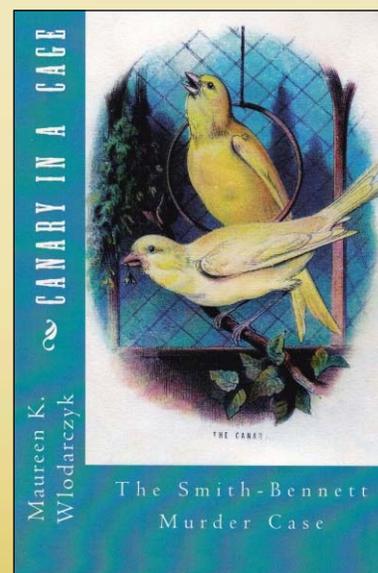
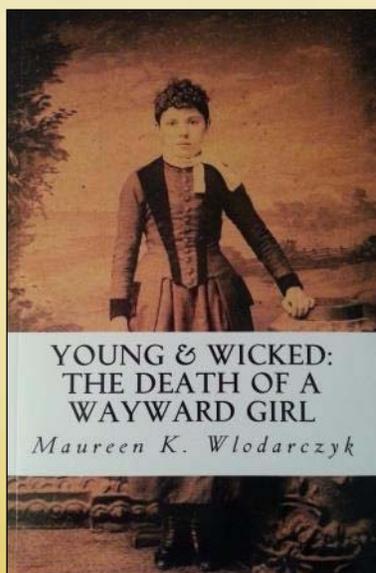
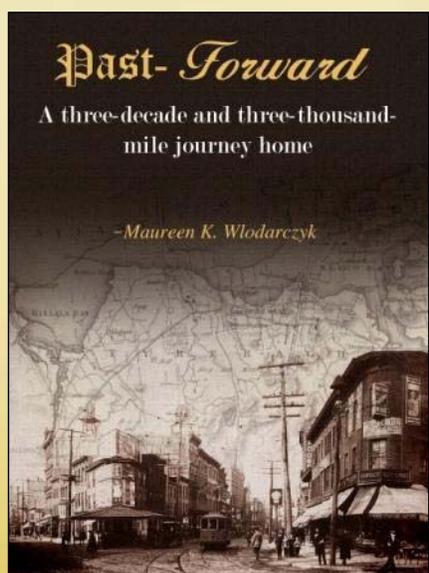
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