

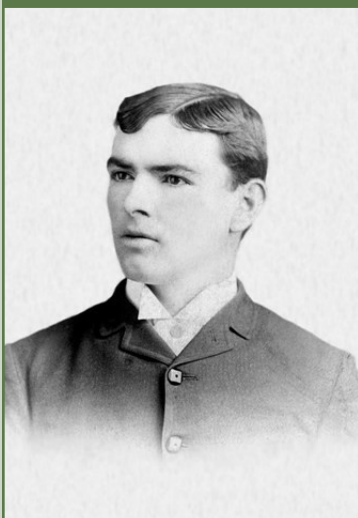
All Roads (& Waterways) Lead to Jersey City

My first book, *Past-Forward*, was a memoir about my three-decade search for my maternal grandmother's Irish roots. Since my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother were all born in Jersey City and so was I, much of that book takes place there in the 19th and early 20th century as my Irish famine immigrants and their descendants found their way as new Americans. Being a believer in the "warts and all" school of genealogy, I didn't hold back in describing their hardscrabble lives as poor tenant farmers in Ireland or as part of the poor laboring class in Jersey City's Irish immigrant neighborhood. My second and third books, *Young & Wicked* and *Canary in a Cage*, each recount a true story of life and death in 19th century Jersey City, each involving a murder and exploring the lives of both the victims and those accused and tried for the murders. So, I guess it should come as no surprise that people periodically contact me because they have a Jersey City story of their own to share or are doing research about life in Jersey City in the 1800s and early 1900s. The latest to contact me were two gentlemen, one named Howie, originally from Jersey City and now living fifteen minutes away from me in Middlesex County and the other, Caoimhghin, living 3,000 miles away in Derry, Northern Ireland. Although an ocean apart in locale, they had something in common: a fascinating Jersey City story to share.

Caoimhghin, my new friend from Derry, is up to his elbows in research for a book about the life of a young 19th century Fenian activist from County Cork arrested and imprisoned in England in the early 1880s. Upon his release from prison in the late 1890s, a mentally broken man, he was brought to Jersey City to live with and be cared for by his immigrant sisters and brother. His mental state, degraded by years of deplorable mistreatment during his imprisonment, worsened quickly and his family had no alternative but to commit him to an asylum in Long Island. He would soon escape from there, never to be seen again. When I received Caoimhghin's first intriguing email asking for assistance in researching life in Jersey City in the last decade of the 1800s, I reread it multiple times. Caoimhghin's explanation of his project was thorough and his writing style was akin to having a traditional Irish storyteller sitting next to me spinning a tale. Over the following weeks, I assisted him with his research using Ancestry, FamilySearch, and newspaper archives and recommended resources about life in Jersey City in the late 1800s. We worked in tandem



Above: Capt. Howard Herbert
Below: James Herbert



digging into the newly-available Catholic parish records on the National Library of Ireland website. Caoimhghin and I have become email pen-pals and I expect we will keep in touch. Who doesn't want to get an email that makes you feel like you are in Ireland sitting cross-legged on a rag rug in a thatched cottage as the turf fire warms you and a gifted seanchaí takes you away with his tale?

Howie Herbert, born in Jersey City, contacted me with an idea for a book about his father, Howard Herbert Sr., a Jersey City tugboat captain recognized multiple times for his heroism in rescuing people from the waters of the Hudson River. As it turns out, successive generations of the Herbert family made their livelihood on local waters and their collective lives make for an interesting family history and a story I am very pleased to share.

After reviewing the initial information Howie shared with me about his father's heroism, I reacted as I always do when considering writing about a new subject: I began to do some genealogical digging to find out more about Captain Howard Herbert and his parents. My default approach when writing about someone is to expand their story by putting it in the context of where they came from—both geographically and biologically. My initial efforts were rewarded with the discovery that Captain Herbert's father, James Herbert, also a local mariner, was born in Pennsylvania to Irish immigrant parents, that revelation whetting my appetite for more digging. Moving further back in time, I found that James's father Patrick Herbert, born in Ireland in 1839, had settled in Pennsylvania and . . . wait for it . . . was a *boatman* according to the 1870 U.S. census.

I shared that information with Howie Herbert (Jr.) and he provided me with some family genealogy records and newspaper articles about his father's exploits. The Herbert family traces their roots to County Sligo, the same place where my own Irish lived before coming here to escape the Great Famine of the late 1840s. Howie's great-grandmother, Ann Doherty, was a young child during those awful years of deprivation and immigrated to Pennsylvania with her parents and nine siblings in 1861. About two or three years later, she married fellow Irish immigrant Patrick Herbert.

Ann and Patrick Herbert lived in coal country in Honesdale, Pennsylvania, the origin point of the Delaware & Hudson Canal, built in the late 1820s for the purpose of transporting coal to New York City. The Delaware & Hudson Canal Company (D&H) branched out into railway building to extend their sales and delivery network into more of the Northeast. As the 19th century was ending, canals were increasingly supplanted by railroads in the transportation of coal and other commodities. In 1898 after 70 years, D&H ended operation of its 108-mile canal system. Probably seeing what was coming, Patrick and Ann Herbert had relocated their family from Honesdale to Jersey City in the late

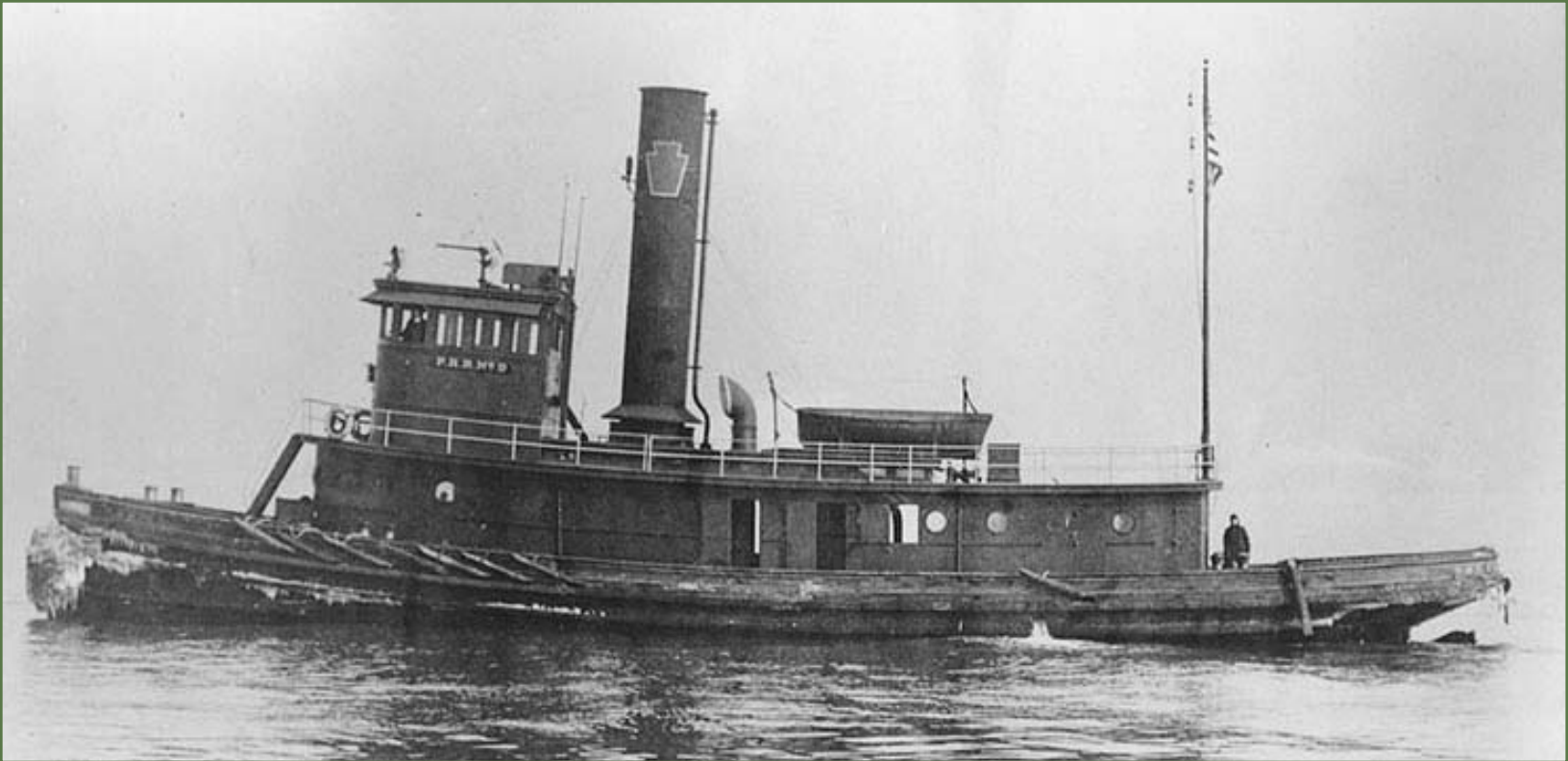


The Morris Canal

1880s. Jersey City, like Honesdale, was part of a canal system. The Morris Canal ran from there to Phillipsburg, meaning that Jersey City was a place where Patrick could employ his mariner skills. Tragically, in August 1899, Patrick Herbert, 60 years old, accidentally drowned in the Morris Canal off Warren Street in Jersey City, near the home he owned on Grand Street. A *Jersey Journal* article said his lifeless body was found in the water by a local night watchman. It went on to describe Patrick as “the owner of several tugboats and considerable property,” a sign of his hard work and its results.

Patrick Herbert’s son James Herbert is found in the 1910 U.S. census living with his family in Waterford Village in Saratoga County, New York. James gave his occupation as a boatman working on the Hudson River. His 16-year-old son William was working at the canal there as a laborer. By 1920 when the census-taker returned, James Herbert, then 51 and a widower living in Jersey City, reported that he was a steamship captain. James died before the next census in 1930 but his son Howard J. Herbert, following in his father’s and grandfather’s footsteps, was recorded in that census as a 30-year-old Jersey City boat captain. In 1940, Howard was working as a tugboat captain for the Pennsylvania Railroad.

Captain Howard “Happy” Herbert distinguished himself repeatedly with his daring water rescues and was a well-known local hero in Jersey City. Happy’s first rescue happened in 1907,



Above: Example of a Pennsylvania Railroad tug boat.
Below: PRR Medal awarded to Capt. Howard



at the age of 8, while traveling on his father's canal boat, the "Reliance," from Elizabeth Port, New Jersey to Quebec, Canada. One evening while they were docked on the Lake Champlain Canal, young Happy heard a man who had fallen into the water crying out for help. His father and the other canal boatmen having gone for some drinks at a local saloon, Happy sprang into action. He got a rope and threw it to the man in the water and then ran like hell to the saloon to get help. The grateful rescued man offered young Happy his own gold watch in appreciation of what he had done. Happy and his father Jim said no reward was necessary or could be accepted. About two months later, Happy crossed paths again with the man he had helped rescue. This time when the gold watch was offered to Happy, it had been engraved: "To Howard Herbert, for saving my life on July 24, 1907." It was Happy's watch from then on.

That was just the beginning of Captain Howard Herbert's many heroic adventures that would span the next three decades. Over his life, he was credited with more than thirty water rescues where he jumped into canals or the waters of the Hudson and East Rivers. Only in one incident was a life lost. In that case, Captain Herbert dove into the ice-filled river, keeping the victim afloat by holding the man's coat in his teeth. Despite all his efforts, the man did not survive.

Captain Herbert received multiple awards from the Life-Saving Benevolent Association of New York that came with prizes including cash awards of one hundred dollars, gold bars, and medals. He was also nominated twice, in 1924 and 1938, for the Carnegie Medal for Heroism. In doing research on Captain Herbert, I came across an article revealing that his heroism didn't only take place on the water. In March 1935, both the *New York*

Times and the *Trenton Evening Times* reported that the Captain had been riding on a bus in Jersey City when he spotted a runaway milk wagon without a driver and jumped into action. The *Trenton Evening Times*, under the headline "Sea Hero Proves His Worth Ashore," reported the incident as follows:

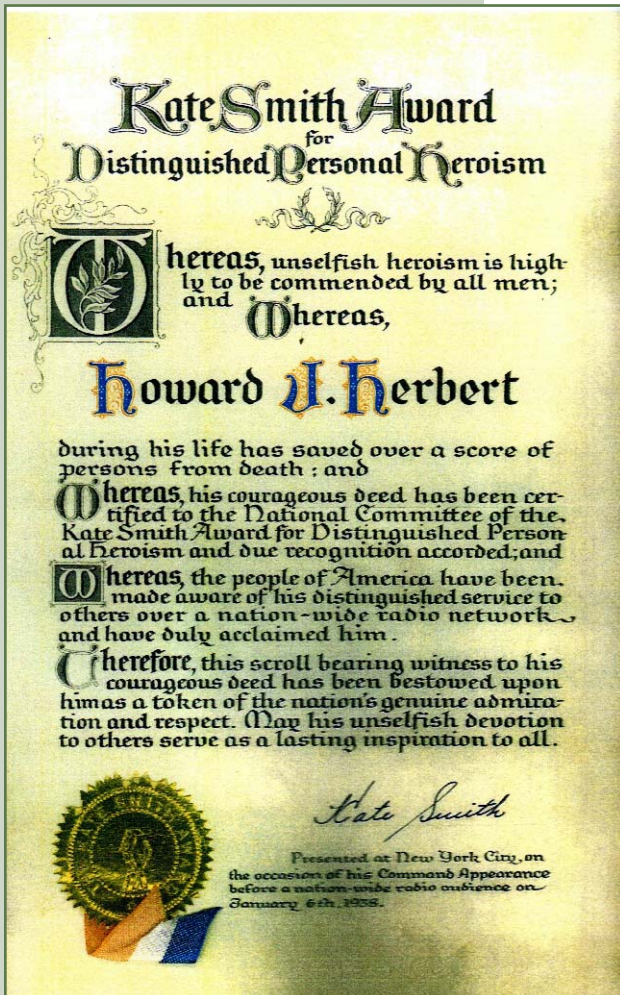
"A hero on land and sea is Captain Howard (Happy) Herbert. Herbert, who is credited with saving 21 persons from drowning, stopped a runaway milk horse as it bore down on a group of Sunday School children on crowded Ocean Avenue. He spied the runaway from a bus, ordered the driver to overtake it, leaped from the running board to the careening, driverless milk wagon and pulled the frightened horse to a halt. Herbert, who commands a Pennsylvania Railroad tugboat, has twice been cited by General W.W. Atterbury, president of the Pennsylvania, for heroism in the course of duty."

The hero himself was quoted in the *New York Times* as having said "the jolt almost landed us in the cemetery!"

In 1936, Captain Herbert's heroism was recognized by the Governor of New Jersey, Harold G. Hoffman, who sent him a letter that read: "Dear Happy: If I am ever in the water, on the verge of drowning, I hope that you will be close at hand so I may be saved."

The award that meant the most to Captain Herbert came to him through singer Kate Smith's popular "Bandwagon" radio show that included a regular feature recognizing "heroes of everyday life." In the fall of 1937, one of the Captain's tugboat deckhands wrote to Miss Smith describing a recent incident of Herbert's heroism and asking that his efforts be recognized on the Bandwagon show. He was selected as one of three nominees for the Kate Smith Hero Award. The winner of the award was determined by the show's audience who sent in postcards with their votes after listening to a dramatization of each nominee's act of heroism. Captain Herbert won handily and, on the broadcast of January 6, 1938, received his award and commemorative scroll from Kate Smith herself, an experience of a lifetime.

Captain Herbert's story illustrates a point I make when presenting programs and doing talks: the lives of "regular" people, long gone, often make for fascinating tales, worthy of remembering and sharing. Their stories are a form of time machine, transporting us back, giving us a glimpse of life in the past, reminding us where we came from, and bringing context to our own lives. We can be proud that people like Thomas Edison and Frank Sinatra are associated with New Jersey history but, from our own family histories, we can derive a more enduring and personal pride through understanding our ancestors' daily lives.



*"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

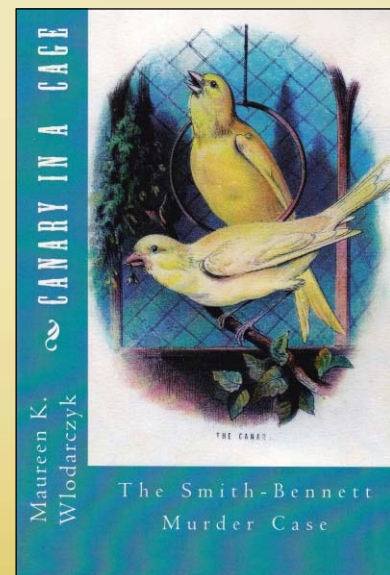
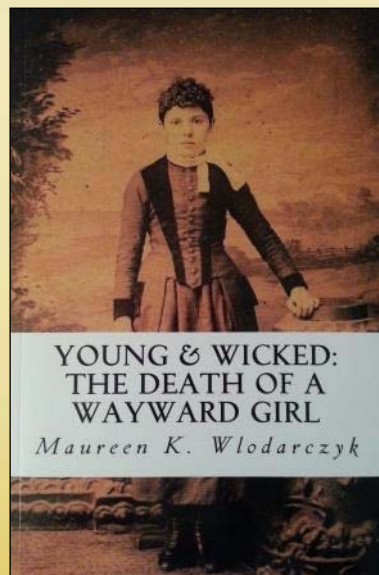
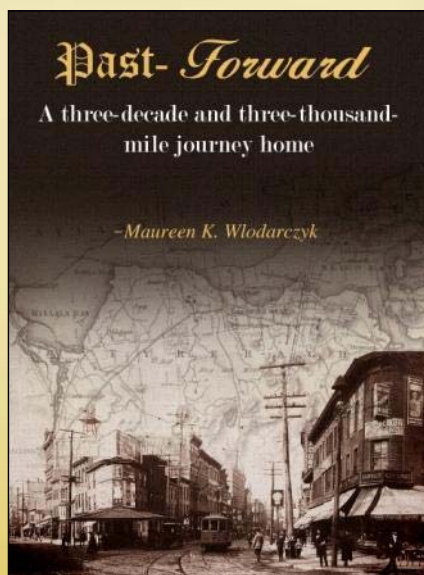
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