

## TWO 90-something Jersey Girls TWO Genealogical Journeys

As another year-end approaches, I looked back at the research projects I worked on and the people who came to me for help rediscovering their family history in 2019. Among them, an adoptee from Pennsylvania who had amassed an amazing cache of information before contacting me and a woman who asked me to search for information and publicity about her 1920s actress grandmother, material for a book she was writing about her. This year also brought me the two oldest clients I have ever had—two young ladies in their 90s. Besides being living proof that it's never too late to work on one's genealogy, these two lively nonagenarians, Marion and Kathleen, were a delight to spend time with.

I met Marion through her daughter, a high school classmate I hadn't seen or talked to for decades until we met again during the planning of our most recent high school reunion. Marion was "all" Polish, that much she knew. The objective was to track her Polish paternal and maternal lines back to a specific location in the homeland. The research followed the usual route—working backwards from Marion's birth using information about her parents and grandparents. Census records were used to create a chronological overview of Marion's paternal and maternal families back to 1900 which confirmed that both families had continually resided in the South Amboy/Sayreville area since at least the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Those census records, which included the federal censuses for 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930, and the NJ state censuses for 1905 and 1915, yielded important details that made it possible to weave a cohesive story of the lives of Marion's immigrant family. It is so important to glean every little detail from census records, including dates of immigration or naturalization, whether families moved or stayed put over the decades, where people worked and their occupations, if they could read and write and if they owned or rented the place where they lived. The 1900 and 1910 US censuses have a column indicating the number of children borne by a woman and how many of those children were still living. In Marion's case, the 1900 census revealed that during 18 years of marriage, Marion's paternal grandmother had given birth to 9 children, 4 of them still alive. By 1910, married 28 years, she had borne 12 children, 6 of them still alive when the census was taken.

The 1900 U.S. census became the next jump off point for pushing back farther with Marion's research. Her father, Walenty/Valentine Nowak, recorded as "William" on that census, was 17 years old and his birthplace was listed as Germany, not Poland. His year of immigration was shown as 1888, the same year indicated for his parents and one of his brothers, who were all shown as having been born in Germany. Similarly, that same census recorded Marion's mother Anna Nebus, then 14 years old, as having



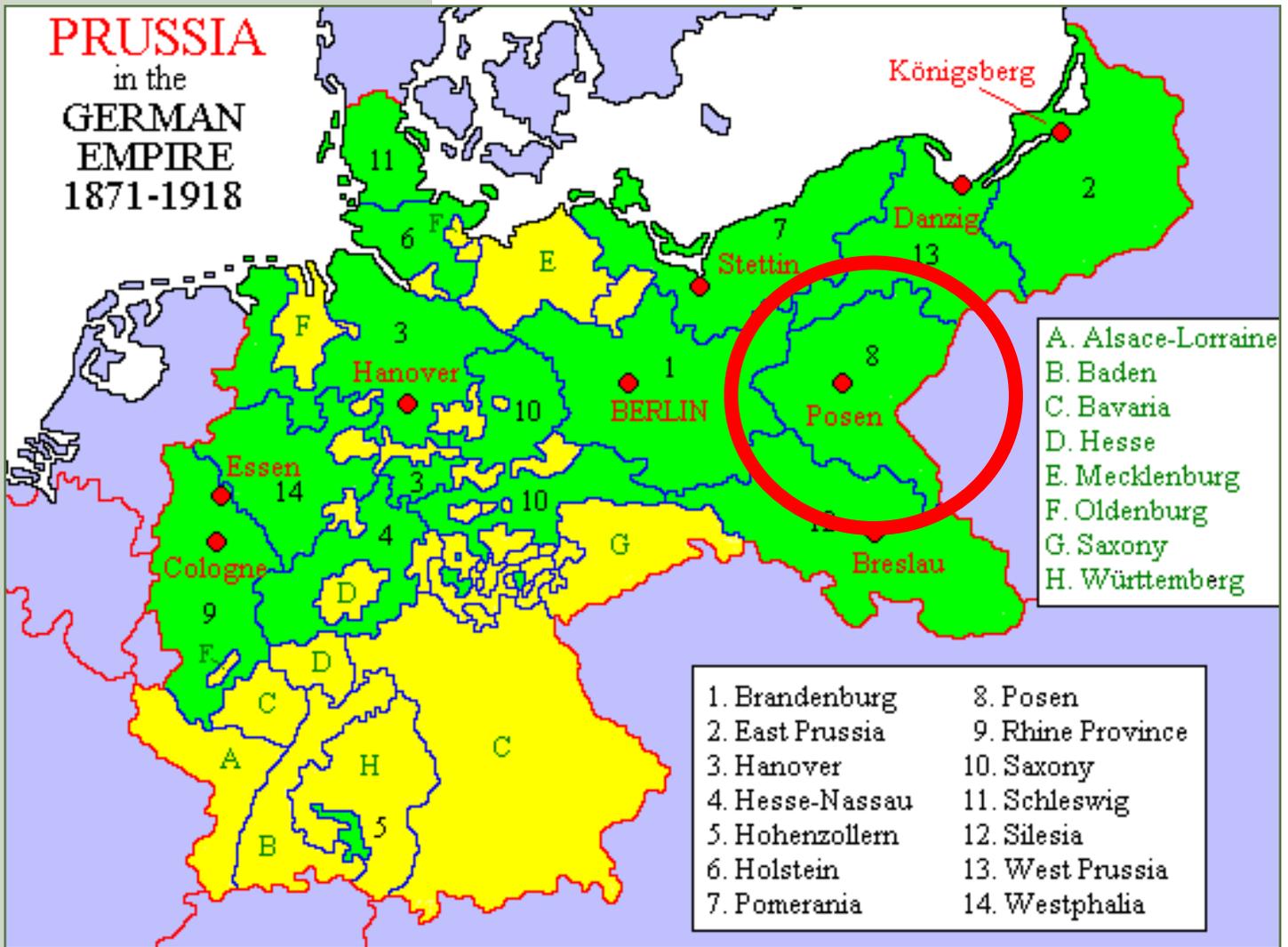
**SS Eider**

been born in Prussia in 1886. No mention of Poland for either family. Clearly there was more to find out and reconcile.

More digging led to the location of ship passenger records for both families. The Nowak family of four embarked for America from Bremen, Germany, in 1888 on the ship *SS Eider* arriving here in April of that year. The Nebus family emigrated in two stages. First, father Josef in 1888, followed by his wife and children in 1893 who embarked for America from Liverpool England on the ship *SS Alaska*.

A field trip to the New Jersey State Archives yielded death records for Marion's Nowak and Nebus grandparents and her parents' 1908 marriage record which listed the specific place both bride and groom had come from: Posen, then part of Prussia and now known as Poznan, Poland. The Nowaks and Nebuses had identified as ethnic Poles living under the governmental authority of Prussia/Germany. The repeated movement of borders during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the region that includes Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Russia often results in a blurring effect in records with respect to nationality, ethnicity, residency and citizenship during that period.

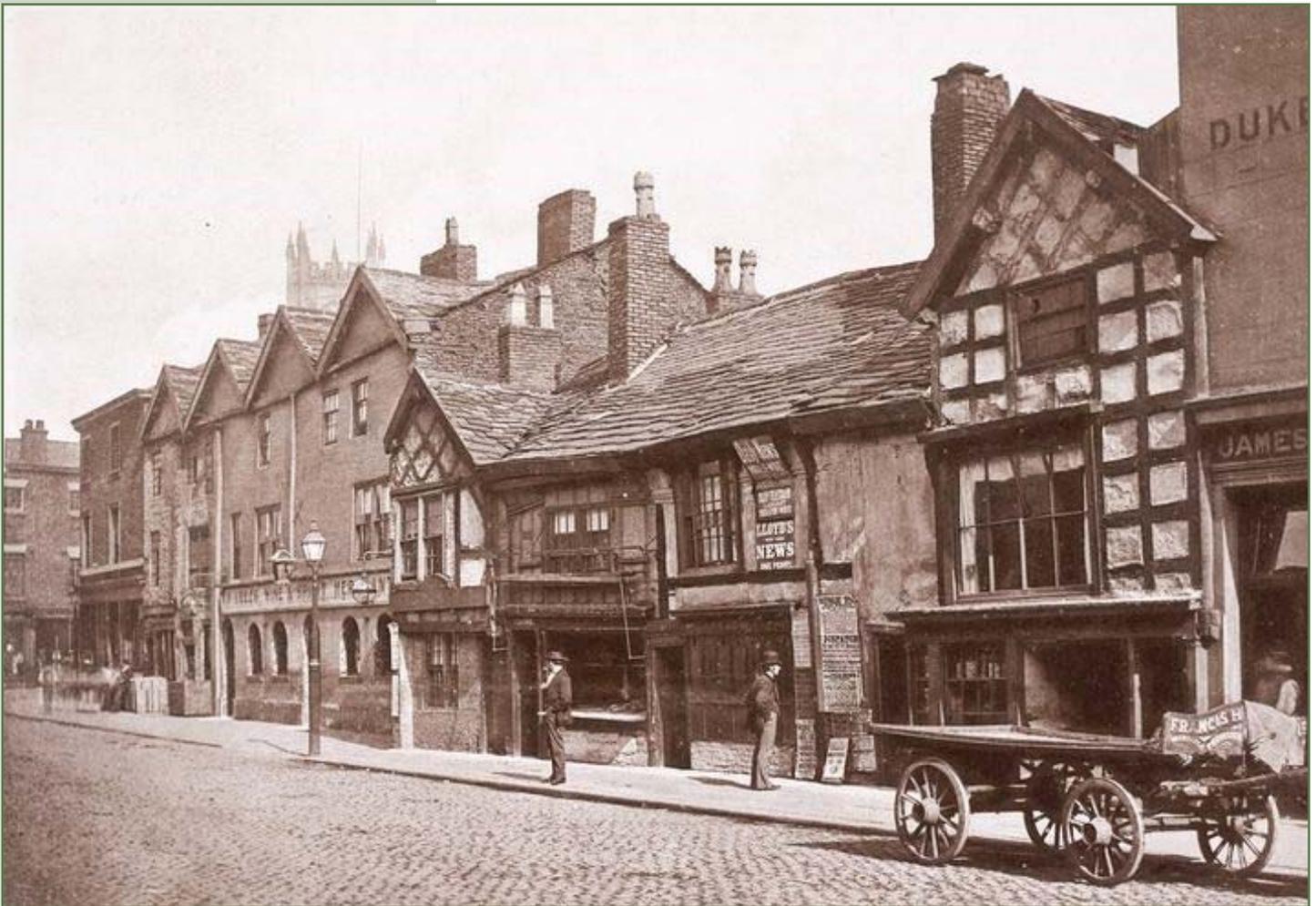
In an attempt to further verify that Posen/Poznan was in fact the place of origin of the Nowak and Nebus families and to gather more historical color about that town and region during the time they lived there, more on-line searching was focused on Posen/Poznan



genealogy and the history of that area. Serendipity struck with the discovery of a site called the Poznan Project: <http://poznan-project.psnk.pl/>, a great repository of 19<sup>th</sup> century marriage records transcribed and posted on the site by volunteers and providing a free search engine to access that information. Marriage records were found for Marion's paternal grandparents, Josef Nowak and Anna Goscinska, married in 1882 in Lechlin-Prusce in the Duchy of Posen, and for her maternal grandparents, Josef Nebus and Amelia Szulc, married in 1880 in Mikuszewo in the Duchy of Posen. An "act of genealogical kindness" by a group of people thousands of miles away had provided the final element needed to definitively connect the dots from South Amboy to Poznan.

\*\*\*

An unexpected phone call led to the opportunity for me to work with Kathleen Conroy Burns on her Irish paternal genealogy research. She had attended one of my presentations and knew that I had spent three decades searching for my own Irish ancestral origins before finally succeeding. Kathleen and I met at a local public library and she shared her extensive (and well-organized) cache of genealogy information. Kathleen's years of Irish genealogy

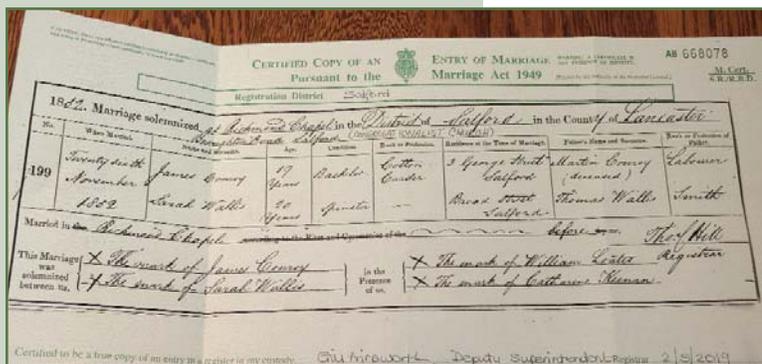


Salford



researching had been preceded by those of her father Joseph Conroy. Joseph, born in 1889 in Elizabeth, had been a letter-carrier as well as a councilman in Elizabeth. Beginning in the 1960s, he undertook a search for his Irish roots, talking with close and distant family, pursuing records locally and from Ireland, and documenting all his research. Kathleen, who shared his interest in family history, took over for her father when he passed away in 1988. The one thing that had eluded both father and daughter was the identification of exactly where in Ireland her Conroy ancestors had lived before leaving their homeland. That became my challenge.

Significantly, Kathleen knew that her Conroys had not emigrated directly from Ireland to the United States. Instead, they had first traveled to England. The story passed down to her was that her grandfather Thomas Conroy was born in England while the family was "waiting for the boat" to America. Kathleen provided the names of her great-grandparents, James and Sarah (née Wallace/Wallis) Conroy, each born in Ireland, as well as the names of Thomas's siblings. Census record searches confirmed that the Conroys were living in New Jersey by 1870, first residing briefly in Jersey City and then in Elizabeth. That 1870 U.S. census record also revealed that four of James and Sarah Conroy's five children had been born in England. So, while the Conroys may have originally had plans for a



1852 marriage record



Sarah Wallis Conroy

short stay in England before going on to America, it would turn out that they had lived in England for a dozen years or so. Ship passenger records confirmed that James Conroy had sailed from Liverpool to New York on the ship *Star of the West* in 1863. His wife Sarah and children Thomas, Catherine, Edward and James followed in 1865 on the ship *City of Cork*. Time to work backwards to see if the Conroys could be found living in England prior to 1865.

A search of U.K. census records found the Conroy family living in Salford England, in the Greater Manchester region of Lancashire, at the time the 1861 census was taken.

James, Sarah, and their oldest children Thomas and Catherine were listed, along with a 20-year-old boarder who was living with them. Both children were shown as having been born in Salford. Using the England & Wales Civil Birth Registration Index on Ancestry.com, Salford birth record registration numbers were found for Thomas, Catherine, and their two siblings (born after the 1861 U.K. census was taken). Rather than ordering the four birth certificates through Ancestry.com at a cost of about \$32 each, the records were ordered on-line directly from the City of Salford at a cost of about \$18 each. The birth certificates were received in about ten days. Sadly, further research confirmed that James and Sarah Conroy had at least one other child born during their time in Salford, a son named Martin, born in 1853, who died there in 1855. This birth information raised a related question: were James and Sarah married in Ireland or might they have met and married in Salford? It took multiple tries but, finally, their U.K. marriage index record was found on Ancestry.com. They were married in 1852 in Salford. The marriage certificate was ordered from the City of Salford and included the name of James's father (Martin Conroy), vital information necessary to continue the search for the Conroys' Irish origins. The marriage certificate indicated that James would have been born in about 1833 in Ireland (although all later census records, U.K. and U.S., consistently reflect a birth year of 1835).

Even knowing James's approximate birth year and his father's name, the next objective—finding the actual place in Ireland that was home to Kathleen's Conroy ancestors—was nowhere near a sure thing. That would require developing some theories based on a detailed analysis of their time in England using the Salford birth certificates and U.K. census records for their Salford neighborhood. A targeted search was done for all Conroys living in that Salford neighborhood when the 1851 and 1861 censuses were taken and, for each one found, occupations and places of birth were noted. While most birth places simply said "Ireland," a few indicated Queens County Ireland (now County Laois)

and another specifically said "Maryborough," in Queens County. The vast majority of Conroys with a job were working in the textile industry. Jobs included cotton dyer, flax spinner, cotton breaker, cotton carder, cotton weaver, silk winder, silk/cotton warper, and calico weaver. Historical research confirmed the Manchester area as a significant hub for textile production during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In fact, there was a Manchester neighborhood known as "Little Ireland," reflecting the large number of Irish immigrants that had come to Manchester for work, particularly in the textile factories. James Conroy was listed as a "cotton breaker" in the 1861 U.K. census. When he married in Salford in 1852, his marriage record indicated his occupation as "cotton carder."

Using this occupational information and the fact that some of the Salford Conroys had come from Queens County, perhaps in the Maryborough area, it was time to learn more about the history of that area in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century with a focus on employment/occupations and the effects of the Great Famine (1846–1852) on the economy. It didn't take long to find out that the town of Mountmellick (near Maryborough) was once known as "The Manchester of Ireland." Mountmellick was home to large woolen mills and spinning factories and, in the first forty years of the 1800s, was a very prosperous industrial hub with several thousand people employed in the mills and other local factories. Sadly, when the Famine ravaged Ireland, the Mountmellick area was not spared. Mills and factories failed, jobs evaporated, and hunger and disease descended on the residents. As in other parts of Ireland during the Famine, many died and many others emigrated, trying to escape the horrific conditions. The Irish took their skills (and not much more) with them as they left. It's logical that mill workers from "The Manchester of Ireland" would make their way to Manchester England in the hope that those skills would bring job opportunities.

Working from this research and hypothesis, a search for the birth of a James Conroy with a father named Martin Conroy in the Mountmellick area was done. (The name *Martin*, not one of the most popular Irish male names, made the search more promising and manageable.) The search identified a James Conroy, baptized in 1836, the son of Martin and Catherine (Horan) of Mountmellick, very likely the James Conroy who made his way to Manchester during the Famine, married there and, a decade later, brought his young family to New Jersey.

\*\*\*

It was my pleasure to meet and work with Marion and Kathleen and others to research their family histories this past year. My sincere thanks to those who entrusted me with the search for their roots and to those who came out to the programs I presented this year. My passion for genealogy has given me the gift of meeting hundreds of wonderful people, making new friends, and being inspired by the stories shared with me.

On to 2020 and more genealogical adventures!

