

The World of Mary Farrington, 1841-1932

by Elsie Reynolds

Born in 1841, Mary Farrington was a quintessential survivor: a Famine survivor, a coffin ship survivor, a Civil War (and Draft Riot) survivor, and a survivor of the tatterdemalion democracy of the Five Points district (modern-day Chinatown) where her parents first found lodging upon arriving in New York in 1852-53. Elsie Reynolds, a retired Hofstra University Librarian, is unsure if she really remembers her great grandmother Mary, who died in 1932 when Elsie was five, or if family photographs of the two of them together have suggested all the memories she has of the family matriarch. But drawing on stories passed down to her and with the aid of a precious family heirloom—44 letters written by a great-granduncle killed at Gettysburg—she has succeeded spectacularly in reconstructing the life of her great-grandmother.

—Editor

Mary Farragher (her father “Americanized” the family name from “Farragher” to “Farrington” shortly after being naturalized in New York in 1856) was baptized on January 28, 1841 in the parish of Shrule on the border of Counties Mayo and Galway. Her parents, Thomas Farragher and Bridget Moghan were both born in the parish, Thomas in the townland of Mycolga (Mocollagan) and Bridget in the adjacent townland of Cahernabrock. The thatched cottage where Mary was born in Mocollagan is on a rocky ridge from which one can look over green fields and stone walls to the present Church of St. Joseph in Shrule.

Thomas and Bridget had three other children besides Mary: Judy (1839), Patrick (1843), and John (1846). Others may have been born later but the records for the famine period are incomplete. Judy must have died when just a child or perhaps during the Great Famine in the mid-1840s. Galway and Mayo were particularly hard hit.

As the famine deepened, Mary’s Mother and Father made the bitter decision to emigrate. They set out for America, taking the two boys, Patrick and John, with them. They left Mary with her step-grandmother and promised to send for her as soon as they were settled. Twice they sent money for her passage, but she did not come. Finally, they sent money to a neighbor and the grandmother was forced to let her leave. This grandmother, whose maiden name was Higgins, was the second wife of Mary’s grandfather Patrick. It was not for love, but for greed that she wanted to keep Mary in Ireland. She wanted to keep her as a servant.



We do not know when Mary left Ireland. Family tradition says that she was 12 or 13 years old. That would mean that she came to America in 1853 or 1854, but Mary never knew her true age. She could not have come before mid-1855, because she is not listed with her family in the 1855 New York State Census. On the 1920 Census and on Mary’s death certificate, the date of her arrival was given as 1857.

Mary bade all her cousins and aunts and uncles and friends in Shrule goodbye and went about 20 miles to Galway City with some neighbors. There they embarked on a tiny sailing ship. The crossing was very rough and when they had nearly reached America a fierce storm pushed them back almost to Ireland. The little vessel plowed its way back across the North Atlantic and finally reached New York five months after it had set sail from Galway. The ship and passengers had been given up for lost. Mary’s family had kept vigil at the dockside every day for months. Finally they bowed to the certainty that she was dead.

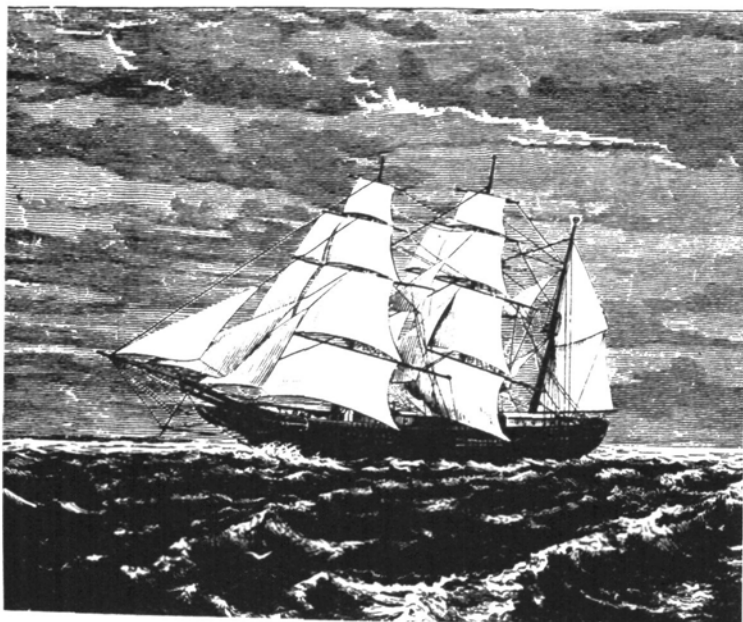
The next day, the first that they had failed to meet the incoming boats, Mary's ship arrived. She followed instructions and went up to the first policeman she met. He recognized her and said, "Mary, is it really you?" Then he took her to her family and their grief turned to joy. Some say that the policeman was her uncle.

The Farringtons lived on City Hall Place (where Mary's brothers Patrick and John attended P.S. 23), then on Mulberry Street. Mary's father had difficulty finding work, occasionally obtaining jobs as a government clerk (apparently as a reward for serving as a ward heeler for Tammany Hall).

Mary never had a chance to go to school—in Ireland few girls did in those days and she was kept busy working at home. When she reached New York, she was too old to begin school. So she never learned to read or write. She knew both Gaelic and English, but she spoke the latter without an accent.

Soon after her arrival in New York, Mary became one of the City's many Irish servant girls. In the 1860 Census, she is listed as a domestic servant with a family of five named Crowell in the First District of the old Ninth Ward on the west side of Manhattan (near Christopher and Houston Streets). Besides Mary, whose age is given as 17, the Crowells had another domestic servant Anna Herman (19) from Germany. The Crowells must have been kind to Mary and treated her well. In his letters from the Civil War, Mary's brother Patrick asks to be remembered to them, especially the children, in tones of familiarity and fondness.

Patrick's letters tell us many things about Mary. First of all, they reveal an affection between brother and sister which was not diminished by the years of separation when he was in America and she was still in



Ireland. In his letters to his parents, Patrick is loving and respectful. His letters to Mary are light-hearted and breezy. He teases her and he scolds her. In a serious vein, he says not to be afraid to tell him anything, for he will not tell Mother and Father.

From his letter of 31 March 1863, we learn that Mary has been to the 69th Regiment (Irish Brigade) Ball at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel on St. Patrick's Night.

Camp Near Falmouth

March 31st/63

Dear Sister, you say that you had a good time of it on St. Patrick's night at the Ball given by the members of the 69th Regt. I have seen a good deal in the Papers about that Ball. I suppose it was well crowded. But you did not tell me who was your Companion at that Ball. You need not try to make me believe that Father brought you for I will not believe it. You say that Cousin John had his girl there. So I know it must not be him that accompanied you. But I think I could make a good guess at the person. Now then let me see: It must be the Carpenter. Now don't deny it.

You say that Julia wants me home to be Godfather for her next young one. Well if she will keep it until the 25th of May, I think I might be there then to stand for it. You say Mary Vahey has hers, but you did not tell me whether it is a boy or girl.

You say that my intended brother-in-law would be very glad to see me. Well I would like to see him, but when I do see him I hope there will be no such thing as intended about him. I suppose you know what I mean.

You say that Mother showed Peter Walsh Miss McGuire's likeness and told him that it was my Secesh girl. Now I think Peter gave her a reason about her not being the Secesh girl; but there is some very good looking (sic) girls in Virginia for all that, especially in Warrenton. There I saw as fine girls as I ever saw and they were not scarce either.

Give my respects to your Carpenter, also to your Mother-in-law, also to Miss McGuire, and to Mrs. Frainey and tell her I wish her joy, as I cannot do it myself at present. Give my respects to Mrs. McCue and John, also to James McCue and Julia. Give my love to Cousin Mary and Georgia, but to the deuce with the Johnny Bull. Give my love to Cousin John and tell him not to wait for me, and I hope yourself will also take the advice. Give my love to John, also to Father and Mother. You need not be afraid to tell me anything. They will not find it out. So good bye for the present.

Your Brother,

PATT



Mary's parents, Bridget née Moghan, 1817-1894, and Thomas Farrington, c. 1817-1870

It is only from Patrick's letters that we learn of "the Carpenter," a young man whom Mary loved and lost. Patrick writes of "your Carpenter" and repeatedly refers to her forthcoming marriage and her future mother-in-law. Early in 1863 he says he will soon be home for her wedding; but as the Spring progresses, he urges her to go ahead with her marriage and not wait for him to return from the war —because it is possible that he may never return.

In the early months of 1863, Mary was a happy 22-year-old. She was young and beautiful, with a lovely complexion, dark hair and bright sky-blue eyes. She had a pleasant job with kind employers and a caring family. Most of all she was in love and planning to be married.

Then her world changed forever: Early in July her brother was wounded at the Battle of Gettysburg. Their Father went to Pennsylvania to see him and returned believing his son would recover. Patrick's leg was amputated without anesthesia. Antiseptics were scarce and blood poisoning set in. He died two weeks after the battle.

While her brother was suffering and dying in Gettysburg, the Ninth Ward of Manhattan where Mary lived became a battleground. It was there that the great Draft Riots of 1863 began. The poor, especially the Irish poor, rose in anger against Lincoln and his new draft.

They who had lost so many of their sons in the war to save their new country revolted against the start of a new draft. They opposed it because it assessed a higher percentage of men from the poorer districts of the City than from the wealthier ones. Moreover, it allowed rich men to buy their way out of the draft by hiring someone else to serve and perhaps die. The fighting was fierce and it went on for days. Many people were killed.

Mary's "Carpenter" disappeared forever at this time. Patrick died so there were no more letters mentioning "the Carpenter" or his fate. Mary never spoke of her sad romance. She did not marry for 12 more years. Whatever happened, she had lost her brother and her sweetheart. She never forgave President Lincoln. For the rest of her long life she reacted with anger and disgust when his name was mentioned.

(overleaf) One hundred thirty years after they were written, "Patt" Farrington's letters make haunting reading today. Young Patrick had apprenticed to become an iron molder, but enlisted in the Union Army soon after war was declared.

Bolivar Heights is just outside Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. Warrenton is fifty miles south in Virginia.

Bolivar

October 24th 1862

... This is a verry (sic) fine place but rather cold up here on this mountain. But down in the village it is not near as cold. This place is getting quite a large population. Some of the old residents returning to their homes, and some of the soldiers friends coming out to see them. Also the many sutlers and vendors, who take away the hard earnings of the poor soldiers, for knick knacks, make the place quite lively and interesting. Something like home about it. But among them all I could not recognize a friendly face. I had a letter from Father yesterday and he said all the folks were well.

Comp G 2nd Regt N.Y.S.M.

Gorman's Brigade

Warrenton

November 14, 1862

Dear Mary, you wanted to know if I wanted any stockings for the winter. I dont, for stockings is the only thing of any good given us by Uncle Sam. They are of the best of wool and made to wear, and the only thing that I can wear of undergarments that Uncle Sam gives. I have worn but one shirt of his since I joined. I have one of the shirts that my father sent after the first Battle of Bull Run.

As for being home next Christmas I cannot say for sure yet. Before we began to march I was sure of getting home this winter, but now there will be no furloughs granted. So I do not know what to say yet; but I can say one thing, and that is that I am getting disgusted with the way this war is carried on. Everyting (sic) is going wrong since General McClellan was removed and all the men is in a state of mutiny on account of it.

I hope you will answer this right away. . . . **Patt**

Camp Near Falmouth, December 25th 1862

Good Morning Father, and a Merry Christmas and a happy New Year to you all.

Dear Father, last night was Christmas Eve but it did not appear so to me. I never put in so lonely a Christmas Eve in my life. I was on guard, and I often thought of home during the night, there was hardly a stir in the Regiment, if I am to except a few, who wiser than the rest spared their money and put it to use last night. but they were but a few.

Last Christmas, I did not feel it much for I had plenty of everything, but then I missed your faces. but it was far different this time every body felt lonesome, and I tell you it was after during the night that I thought of all of you. Sometimes I

Camp Near Falmouth, Virginia

April 17th/63

Dear Sister, I suppose you know very little about what we poor soldiers has to endure while on a march. So I will try and describe a little of my experience to you. In the first place we have to carry all our clothes and food, also our houses, which must include kitchen utensils and all other articles necessary, and also our bed and bed clothes, for we could not do without them, of course. -With all of these we have to carry our arms and ammunition and march at the rate of ten miles per day, sometimes more. We get an hour for our dinner each day. And at night when we halt, first thing to look out and have a good supply of wood for fires. You can see one squad go for wood and another for water out of each company, when we halt for the night. It is very seldom that we have to carry more than three days provisions, but this time we have to carry 8 days provisions. And for this purpose we had to return in to the Quartermaster all our clothes, our blankets included, with the exception of a change of underclothing which we are to retain.

It is the general supposition that we are going to North or South Carolina, and everything so far confirms the report. . . .



Camp Opposite Fredericksb'rg

June 3rd/63

Dear Sister, I embrace the present opportunity to write you a few lines as I cannot get home at present for our officers has been undermining us and I believe they have succeeded in keeping us for another year. So there is no chance to get home now as the furloughs is stopped. So when I cannot get home myself, I am sending you my likeness to represent me at home. I think it will have to do for a while; and I think you had better tell John not to wait for me to go home to be at his wedding. And yourself also had better not wait.

I have nothing more to say now. So I will conclude by sending you all my love and respects.

I remain your affectionate brother,

PATT

(above) Patrick Farrington, 1843 - 1863, and his grave in Gettysburg National Cemetery

Mary continued her work as a domestic servant in the Ninth Ward. The 1870 Census lists her with the family of John McKensy. Her parents moved from lodgings “uptown” on East 26th Street to a tenement in City Hall Place, around the corner from St. Andrews Roman Catholic Church. They were very poor. Mary’s father Thomas, suffering from lung disease aggravated by the loss of his son, was unable to work. Her mother Bridget supported them by working as a laundress. They wrote pitiful descriptions of their plight when they applied for a pension as survivors of a son killed in the Civil War. Thomas died early in 1870. Later that year, the 1870 Census lists Bridget and her younger son, John, living with a family named Quinn at 34 City Hall Place. John found work as a New York City policeman.

It was probably there, on a visit to her mother on her day off, that Mary met Thomas Quinn, a recent arrival from Ireland. He had been born in Ballinvoher, Galway — a place about five miles from Mary’s own birthplace. Thomas was only 17 years old when they met, but his picture shows a tall, mature-looking, dark-haired, handsome young man in Irish homemade clothing. He courted Mary who was very pretty and looked much younger than her years. They were married in St. Andrews Church on January 6, 1875, the Feast of Epiphany. He was 20 years old and she was nearly 34. They set up housekeeping in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn near the oil yards where Thomas was employed.

Mary’s brother married about the same time, so her mother came to live with Mary and Thomas. It was a happy home. Together the young couple worked hard and made ends meet. Their four children look well-dressed and healthy in their studio portraits—Mary was 35 years old when her first son was born and 42 when she had her last child. Thomas, Jr. died in 1893 at the age of 13. The following year, Mary’s mother passed away.

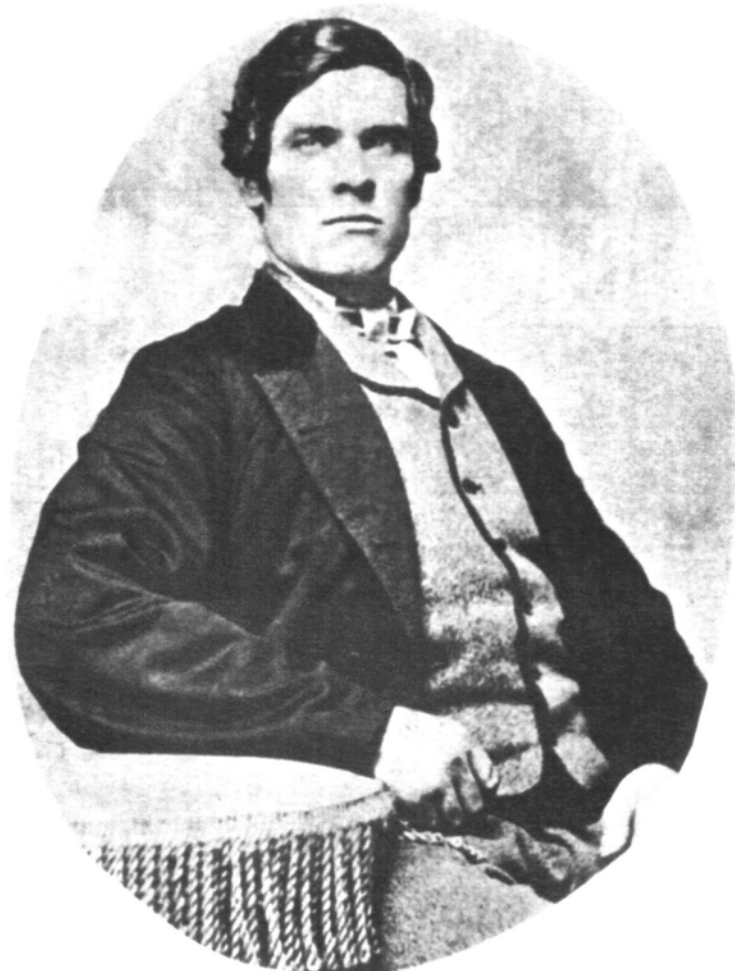
The children were encouraged to study and get a good education. Even Mary, the only daughter, graduated from the 8th grade, an uncommon feat for girls of her economic class. The boys probably went to high school as well. Both had good careers in the United States Postal Service. Mary and Thomas ultimately had 12 grandchildren. Mary’s husband died in 1915 at the age of 60. He and Mary had been married for 40 years. Mary was now 74 years old. She survived her husband by 17 years.

In an afterword, Elsie Reynolds conjures up a luminous picture of her mother as a small girl in the 1920s racing into her grandmother’s room after supper to read to her illiterate granny. Running her fingers through her granddaughter’s long, curly hair as she read, “Granny” Mary Farrington Quinn is described as: “a small, slim erect woman, only two teeth left in her mouth, one stiff,

crooked finger occasionally aching from arthritis, and yet young at heart.” Her granddaughter remembers she loved the tales of Elsie Dinsmore: “[but] Irish through and through, Granny bristled at every mention of the heroine’s Protestant faith, remembering the Ireland she knew as a girl in the 1840s and injustices endured at the hands of English Protestants.”

The widowed Mary Farrington Quinn continued to live with her daughter Mary. With her experience as a domestic servant and years of making a home for her own family, she was a great help to her busy daughter. She helped with all the household work: cleaning, laundering, preparing vegetables, cooking, washing dishes, etc. She was a quiet person, always there to help, but unobtrusive. When not needed, she would retire to her room and say her Rosary in Gaelic. She spent many hours busily knitting scarfs, mitten and stockings. Those long, itchy, woolen stockings are remembered, but not fondly, by her granddaughter, Elsie, who was doomed to wear them from Fall until Spring.

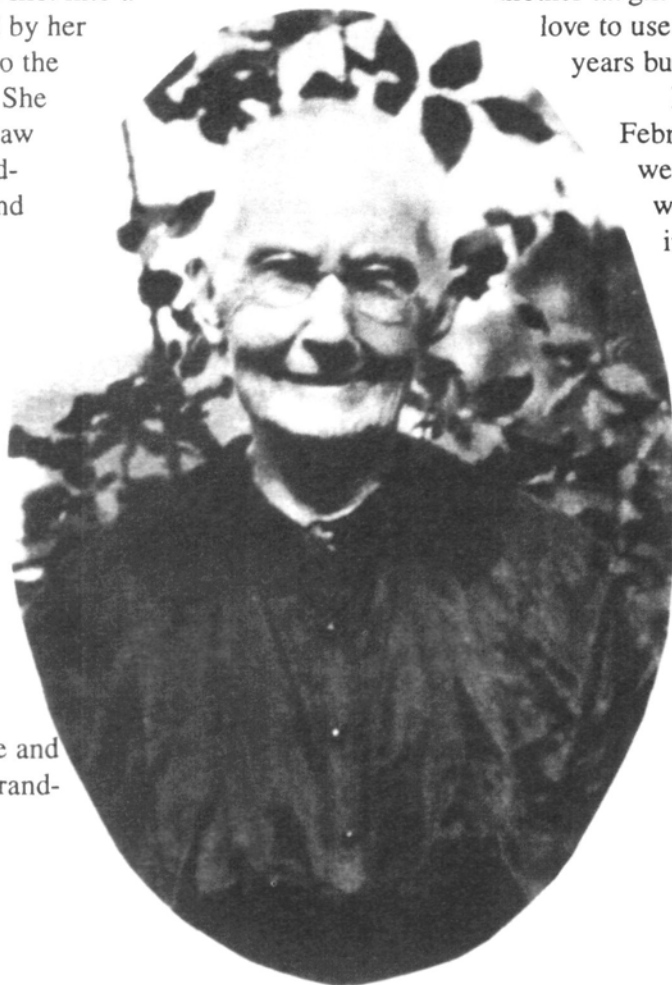
Granny was blessed with a happy nature and a good sense of humor. Once while living on her daughter’s farm in Sussex County, New Jersey, she fell through a trap door



Mary’s husband, Thomas Quinn, 1854-1915

in the kitchen: down she went feet first into a cistern in the basement, cushioned by her long dress and three petticoats, into the water at the bottom of the cistern. She exclaimed in surprise; her son-in-law complained and her daughter scolded. The two grandchildren, Tom and Elsie, nearly burst trying to keep from laughing as she was boosted and hauled out, dripping and apologetic. For all her 80 plus years, she was none the worse, once she had replaced her soggy clothes.

Granny was a willing conspirator with Cupid. When Elsie was in high school, she fell in love with Joseph Reynolds. Her family did not approve and it was to separate the young couple that they moved to Erie. They did not succeed in making Elsie forget Joe and she wrote to him every day. Her grand-



mother taught her Irish words of affection and love to use in her letters. Granny was old in years but always young in heart.

Mary Farrington Quinn died February 12, 1932, just a couple of weeks past her 91st birthday. She was interred in Calvary Cemetery in Queens, New York where her husband and her parents had been buried many years before.

(left) Mary Farrington Quinn in her eighties.

(below) Mary's brother Patrick fought with the Second Regiment of the New York State Militia. In this last letter he describes attending Mass offered by a priest from the "Fighting 69th" Irish Brigade.

Some of the Regiments around us here that has been paid of lately, celebrated the night right well for I could hear them cheering and singing all night. beside the bands being played the whole night. Not even a mass could I hear today, but thank God, I heard mass celebrated, and I received Communion, the day before yesterday, for one of the Clergymen of the Irish Brigade came over here and gave every body that wanted to a chance. So I was among the number