

Thanks to My Ancestors (Wherever You Came From): What I Learned Doing Genealogy

BY ROBERT J. MCGRATH

Some years ago, I was browsing through an *Irish Echo* article containing a schedule of classes on genealogy. They were to be given by Maryellen McGarry, a longtime Roundtable member and an officer. I signed up for the genealogy classes, and also an introduction to Irish language course. Sticking with genealogy was fine—but the language course had a dropout. Maryellen gave many good sources for tracing family lineage. As classes were ending, it looked like everything was going to be do-able for my search. Then someone said something like, “You can probably trace your ancestry for Famine-times immigration as long as your ancestor’s name isn’t John Smith.” You guessed it: John Smith was one of my great-grandfathers.

My search was slow getting off the ground. I began the quest for ancestry about twenty years ago, before taking the genealogy classes. For various reasons (work, family, and illness), the search has been start-and-stop for the twenty years. But along the way I used some good sources and learned some good lessons, which are part of what this article is concerned with.

In beginning my genealogical efforts, I had no realization of the different degrees of information which people have of their heritage. There are those that know everything through four-hundred or more years of family history. Those folks may be members of *Mayflower* descendant groups or similar organizations. Perhaps they came from nations where excel-

lent written records were established and safeguarded through years of stable government. Perhaps a relative kept documents or fragments, and passed the information down to succeeding generations. People could also have been born in the United States to start off. Whatever the reason, for some, their heritage is well documented. Then, there is a group of people who know something of their heritage. This may be sort of documented by some records that make sense, which are verified to an extent by versions of oral history written down through generations and sometimes formally recorded. Next, there is a group of people who can trace roots of their multiple families only to a particular country and, perhaps, to a particular area in that country. Finally, there are those who

think they were from a particular country based on their family names and hearsay evidence and, perhaps, a record fragment.

ANCESTOR INFORMATION IN OUR FAMILY

Our family falls somewhere between the next-to-last and last groups. My wife is Irish-American with known roots in Clare and Cork. She can trace her family back about two-hundred years. There are still family members on the farmlands where both her parents were born. The current generation is well educated, and some have highly interesting jobs. But knowledge of our family ancestry has been passed orally with a few scraps of paper thrown in.

On my side, my brothers and I thought our father’s family (specifically, his paternal grandparents) immigrated to Canada from



Photo:
Michael Corcoran of the 69th Regiment, the unit in which John Smith served as a drummer boy. Corcoran had emigrated from Co. Sligo to New York in 1849 and rose from private to brigadier general during the Civil War. He was a charismatic leader for his troops, leading them in the defense of Washington and at Bull Run, among other battles. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

Robert McGrath is a member of the Roundtable and serves as its Secretary for Membership. A long-time resident of the Bronx, he recently moved to Yorktown Heights. He holds a bachelor of business administration degree and a master of science degree from Manhattan College, and has been researching the history of his family—for some interruptions—for nearly twenty years. ©2011. Published with permission of Robert J. McGrath.

Ireland in Famine times, and then moved on to the United States. Paternal grandfather, Thomas M. McGrath, immigrated to New York from Canada. Paternal grandmother was born in New York to the John Smith mentioned earlier. Her mother was said to be also from Ireland.

My maternal great-grandparents were said to be from Ireland in Famine times. This was verified because one great-grandfather, Patrick Coleman, served in the Civil War, and some fragmentary records for him existed within the family. Nothing has been found so far of the other great-grandparents on that side. One of that set was a William Jones, a very common family name also.

My family roots are in County GKW (God Knows Where). But for three of my ancestors named above (Patrick Coleman, John Smith, and Thomas McGrath) there are existing partial records, and—unknown to me—all these records existed during my early genealogical search. Researching these particular ancestors there were many “brick walls,” as genealogists call dead-ends in research. (This is why the title of this article is very pertinent to our family ancestry.) But some brick walls were breached, and I would like to tell you about the sources that help to shed light on peoples’ lives. I will go through these three persons’ stories as I now know them, and will share certain conclusions at which I’ve arrived regarding genealogical research.

PATRICK COLEMAN

One of the things passed to us by an aunt, who was my godmother and my mother’s sister, was a two-page record copy from the Civil War. That ancestor who served in the War was Patrick Coleman. This was her grandfather, my mother’s grandfather, and my great-grandfather. This document says that he came from Ireland. Every other record which I have ever viewed says the same thing. My mother was the last of seven surviving children of ten that were born to her Coleman parents.

Patrick came here from Ireland and settled in New York City in the area of St. Joseph’s Church in Greenwich Village. He was married

to Ann Calvin at St. Joseph’s in 1855. This information comes from his Civil War pension records. I think he is the fourteen year-old Patrick Coleman, listed on ship arrival records, who landed in New York during the Famine. Looking through ship arrival records was very difficult at first since they were not computerized to the extent that they are now. These records were viewed at the Family History Center Library, then located on the Westside of Manhattan and now located in several different boroughs around the city. Digging showed that a Patrick Coleman and Ann Calvin both arrived on the same ship to New York, although on different voyages. The ship sailed from Liverpool, but some ships made stops at Cobh in Cork. And my mother told me in earlier years Patrick Coleman was from Cork—but of course this could mean he left from Cork or was born in Cork.

The following historical information was gathered from Patrick’s Civil War pension records. He was about twenty-six when the Civil War began. He lived on Broome Street, toward the Westside, probably in what now is called Soho. Patrick and Ann had two children by this time, Thomas and Sarah. Thomas was my grandfather. Patrick Coleman enlisted in the Union Army as a member of the Second New York Heavy Artillery. His service record gave additional information. He was a teamster prior to service. That indicates he perhaps was stronger than average and was accepted for the artillery service with their large cannon and artillery pieces. According to his service records, he received enlistment and re-enlistment bonuses that helped support his family. He was trained on Staten Island and then headed south for the defense of Washington, D.C. He served in the Battles of Richmond, Virginia and Petersburg, Virginia. During the latter encounter, the commanding general thought that he had too many people in the artillery but not enough infantry so he shifted soldiers. These shifted artillery people, including Patrick Coleman, were probably ill-trained for this new job in the army. Who knows what kind of equipment they had?

Patrick was captured a short distance from Petersburg during that battle. He was sent to the infamous Andersonville prison camp in



Georgia. He died there in late 1864, after almost three years of army service. Patrick Coleman is buried in Andersonville where a National Cemetery was created. His grave number indicated that he was among the last to die there. Patrick's service records yielded these and many other facts. Patrick died from lack of nutrition (prison record lists scurvy). It is ironic that he came to America for a better life and to perhaps escape hunger.

His wife Ann lived in New York almost until her death. She had a meager existence with a small military pension and, upon her death, was buried in Calvary. Nobody really knows where, in Ireland, Patrick or Ann came from.

JOHN SMITH

My father presented me with a copy of a document from the War of the Rebellion, which had been prepared in 1900. This was for his mother's father, John Smith. John Smith came to America and served in the Civil War. That much is known. He was born around 1847 and lived close to St. Patrick's Old Cathedral. I obtained his service and pension records from the National Archives, and they yielded a treasure trove of information. They told us everything, except where he was born in Ireland. John enlisted in the Union Army under Colonel Michael Corcoran. He enlisted when he was approximately fifteen as a drummer boy in the 69th New York, probably in Hibernian Hall opposite the Cathedral. He served during the

first two years of the War and was discharged at the end of 1863. He served in many major battles during that time. He was hospitalized during his service with war-related injuries, such as deafness in one ear and several other maladies. He was only seventeen when discharged. His pension record gives this information.

John married Ann Degnan some years after his discharge. They had several children, only one of whom lived. The others are buried in Calvary in a grave that John bought in 1871. Pension records indicate the Calvary burials. I obtained a location of his grave from the Calvary office and then purchased (at some expense) a full listing of all the interments in the grave.

Ann Degnan Smith died in 1881. John married again, perhaps a year later, at Nativity Church on Second Avenue and Second Street. He and his family can be tracked in census information as moving a little bit uptown at certain times. John's new wife, Mary McGuigan, was my paternal grandmother Rose's mother. They had several children who survived to adulthood. John and Mary died in the early 1900s, leaving two teenagers. They were cared for by Thomas and Rose McGrath after their parents' deaths. John Smith is buried in Calvary along with his families.

John worked for many years in New York City. His legacy, as with Patrick Coleman, was the family that he left behind. Only one child, Rose, lived past age seventy.

THOMAS MCGRATH

Thomas Martin McGrath (the first family member of that name in recent times) was born in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada on May 1, 1877. He died in the Bronx in 1958. I have a birth certificate for him issued by St. Peter in Chains Cathedral in Peterborough (the Cathedral is still there). He had a brother, Leo, and a sister, Mabel, who was "Aunt Babe" to us. There was another child who I discovered some years ago in St. Peter's microfilms, which I ordered from a local Mormon family history center. This child, MaryAnn, died in infancy.

Photo:

Thomas M. McGrath, far left, was born in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, where he supported himself for a while as a high-wire performer. He later moved to New York, became an electrician, and lived with his wife and children in the Bronx. Courtesy of Robert J. McGrath.

Thomas's parents were Ann Jane Clarke and John McGrath. Census records showed their origins as Ireland. I always assumed that they may have been Famine era immigrants from Ireland because of their origins. John was a sawyer, or logger. Stories which my father told me included the fact that the family owned a lumber yard in Canada which burned in a fire. This may explain why all three surviving children immigrated to the United States. Thomas was married here in 1908 to Rose Smith. They lived for a while in Manhattan, but shared Bronx residences over the years. One was on 139th Street, one on Whitlock Avenue, and their last home was at Gleason Avenue. The Whitlock Avenue house was torn down for the Bruckner Expressway, but the Gleason Avenue house is still there.

Thomas McGrath and Rose Smith had four children: Dorothy, John, Rose, and Thomas. Thomas senior evidently worked for the Interborough Rapid Transit Subway Company when he first got to the States. He had a serious interest in ham radio and in 1910 won the Gernsback Award for the best amateur radio station in America. He founded Thieriot Radio and Electric Company in 1919, which later became McGrath Radio Service. He moved that business to Westchester Avenue in the Bronx in the 1930s. He became a licensed electrician, and this plus his interest in radio repair helped his family of wife and four children weather the Depression. All this information comes from keepsakes in my possession and from oral history proudly passed down by my father, John. Thomas had many and varied interests. He was a high-wire performer in Canada during his youth. This is known from hearing of it—and from a picture

of him in costume and the remnants of a circus handbill that survive.

It looked like my great-grandparents on Thomas's side were all Famine immigrants. I spent a lot of time and resources trying to confirm this belief, but came up dry with respect to definite results. So, in 2009, I decided to purchase an Ancestry.com full world membership (this is needed for research in Canada too). One of Thomas' brother's descendants was entered and a family tree had been published on the website. It revealed that John McGrath really had been born in Ontario. (Many census and other documents had him as born in Ireland.) His wife, Ann Jane Clarke,



Photo:
 Photograph of Andersonville, the prison in Georgia for Union soldiers captured during the Civil War. Conditions there became overcrowded and harsh, with some thirteen thousand men dying in the prison. Patrick Coleman was among them. He is buried in the National Cemetery at the site. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

was also born in Ontario, according to Ontario census records and some other Ancestry.com findings. I used a messaging feature in Ancestry.com to contact the individual who had placed the McGrath family tree on Ancestry. It took about six months for some emails back and forth to connect. We were indeed descendents of the same McGraths. I had met some of his ancestors when I was a boy and shared that information with him.

It turns out that Thomas's grandfather was the immigrant from Ireland. He was part of the Peter Robinson Settlers to Canada. These Irish immigrants were the essential part of a depopulation scheme run by England to remove Irish families from large estates in

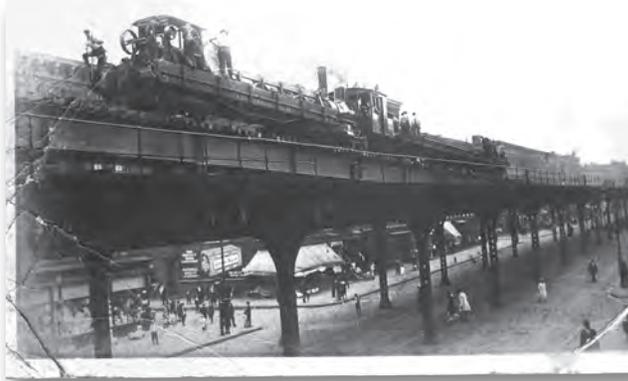


Photo (top):
A work train on the Interborough Rapid Transit Subway (IRT) early in the twentieth century. Like many other New Yorkers of Irish descent, Thomas McGrath found employment on the line, where he became an assistant wireman in 1902. Courtesy of Robert J. McGrath.

Photo (right):
Thomas McGrath and his son, John McGrath, before work equipment at their radio and television sales-service business on Westchester Avenue in the Bronx during the mid-1950s. The business grew, in part, from his early interest and accomplishments in ham radio operation. His grandfather emigrated from Mitchelstown, Co. Cork, in the 1820s. Courtesy of Robert J. McGrath

County Cork while furnishing Canada with settlers. The time frame was 1823–1825. The scheme was also intended to give Canada more residents in the future in case it needed them. The settlers would provide militia should their southern neighbors be a problem to them.

According to information on Ancestry.com, coupled with information from an out of print book purchased on Amazon (*Peter Robinson's Settlers* by Carol Bennett) our McGraths look to be from Brigown townland in Mitchelstown, County Cork. Coincidentally, my wife's father was born in Cork. And during our first trip to Ireland in 1996, Mitchelstown was on that itinerary. It has remained one of our favorite places to visit on our trips. The coffee cups that we still use for breakfast were purchased there in 1996. But in those days I had no clue that my ancestors had lived there. Since this latest discovery, one of my largest brick walls has come tumbling down.

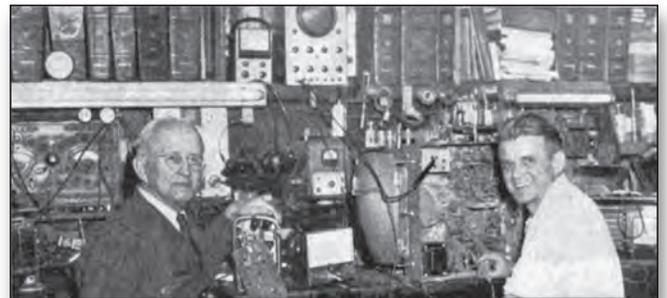
CONCLUSIONS

My genealogical search began with a quest that started from many ideas. There were multiple information gatherings that went off on tangents. For some time, the whole process was treated as a "job" with all these tasks being pushed on to completion. I had a tendency to delay items if I didn't find an answer for each task. After many incomplete tasks I finally came to the realization that genealogy is a hobby that should give you pleasure. I also came to the following additional conclusions:

1. When you shotgun an approach to information, you are sometimes tracking

someone who is not even related. You then need to start over on the person who you really want to track.

2. There are unintended results of a genealogical search. For example, the overall cost can be thousands of dollars—without much to show for it. This can include costs of books and magazines, organizational memberships, classes, seminars, trips, and record searches.
3. Another unintended result is a lot of paper. While preparing to move recently, I discovered there was an accumulation of six boxes of genealogical "stuff." (That is now down to two boxes.) By lacking order in my efforts, I duplicated a lot of research over the years.



4. Another result is the unanticipated effects of sharing discoveries with others. If we do all this research and do not share it with others, we may feel the research is basically wasted. Consequently, I prepared a family-history piece on a relative common to at least ten people and then copied about twenty pages of documents and mailed this family-history package to each of these people. I thought they would share my interest and fit it into their busy lives. But there was very little response to my many hours of work and communication efforts. Finally, I realized that genealogy is a hobby related to a particular individual, yourself. Consequently it was up to me to derive satisfaction from my discoveries, even little ones. Ultimately, of course, the net result of my research is that I care more that my ancestors arrived in America and provided an opportunity for my birth here—not particularly where they were born.