

From Connemara to Minnesota

Connecting families & sharing stories

BY COLLEEN CURRAN AND LESLIE THOMAS
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“*Connemara to Minnesota in the 1880s: The Families and Their Stories*” is a Facebook group recently created to discover our ancestor’s stories after they emigrated from Connemara, Ireland. Our hope is to bring together the extended and lost family descendants of those who came to Minnesota in the early 1880s. This largely forgotten group of people, many who settled on the low-lying ground along the Mississippi River in Connemara Patch and the West Side Flats, make-up a significant part of St. Paul’s Irish history and identity.’

Connemara is a Gaeltacht region in the western part of County Galway. Between 1879-1881 a lesser-known famine, sometimes referred to as the “Forgotten Famine,” occurred in this part of Ireland. During this tragic period our families decided to make the “leap of faith” journey to Minnesota, with aid from two different assisted emigration programs: Archbishop Ireland’s Graceville scheme and James Hack Tuke’s fund.

We knew there were more families who had undertaken a similar journey. Could we find them? And would descendants be interested in joining a group to collaborate and share genealogy research and stories? We decided we had to try. The Facebook group began September 2020 and the results have been even better than we imagined. This article shares some of our discoveries and the power of joining forces.

Our Stories

Colleen: My family’s story begins on the islands off the west coast of Ireland near Carna. Thomas and Bridget Curran lived with their six children, and extended families a stones-throw away. During the famine, starvation could have been their fate; instead they were selected by local priests for an emigration scheme to Minnesota with 50 other Connemara families. Bishop Ireland had recently acquired railroad land in western Minnesota to establish Catholic settlements. The town of Graceville was chosen as the new home for this group of emigrants. The families departed Galway Bay in June 1880 aboard the SS Austrian for Boston and continued to Minnesota by rail. They spent their first summer and the brutal winter of 1880-81 in Graceville, adjusting and barely surviving the harsh conditions. Sadly, the Bishop’s plan fell short of expectations and was a failure in many ways. Most of the Connemara families (including mine) left Graceville in the spring of 1881 and moved to St. Paul, where they settled along Lower Phalen Creek, south of the 7th Street tunnel. Because of this large group, the area became known as Connemara Patch. Our Facebook group shares news articles from this era which convey the many hardships they experienced. Some of these Connemara families remained in the Patch until the



Colleen’s great grandparents Patrick Curran and Mary McDonough Curran with their grandson at their home on East 13th Street in St. Paul.

1920’s. My family eventually made their way to other parts of St. Paul, where life improved for future generations.

Leslie: My Flaherty and Stewart families came from Camus, Annaghvaan and Gorumna in Connemara. They emigrated to St. Paul in 1883, just a few years after the Graceville group. My Flaherty family emigrated via James Hack Tuke’s assisted emigration fund. They sailed on the SS Austrian to Boston, continuing to St. Paul on the railroad via Montreal. Tuke had consulted with Archbishop Ireland to learn from the Graceville emigration experience. Tuke emigrants were required to travel as a family, with at least one member who spoke English. They were able to select their destination, as long as there was someone willing to receive and help them get started upon arrival. My family likely chose St. Paul due to available work and family already there — possibly related to a Graceville family. They settled in Connemara Patch and the West Side Flats (sometimes referred to as the “other Connemara Patch”). Many attended St. Michael’s Church which was built on the West Side to accommodate the neighborhood’s growing Irish Catholic population during this time period. My great-great-grandfather, William Flaherty, was a street sweeper for the City of St. Paul. He and his wife Anne built a small home for their family on State Street where they lived for 25 years, before moving up to the Mt. Airy neighborhood.

Group Success Stories

Neighbors reunite after 120 years. It started on Ancestry.com while Colleen was trying to make a connection with one of her elusive Curran lines. She found a family tree with similar names belonging to someone named Evelyn, and after corresponding for a while Colleen invited her to the FB group. Even though there was no immediate connection evident with Evelyn’s Flaherty line, there was a possibility

she was related to another member, and maybe even a Graceville descendant. Once in the group, members provided census records that revealed an unexpected connection. With Evelyn living across the country, they were able to share the discovery of three Connemara families living next to each other in 1895. Lined-up along Phalen Creek in Connemara Patch were the Curran, Flaherty and Stewart families. The descendants of these families are Colleen, Evelyn and Leslie. Amidst this excitement, Evelyn discovered she was indeed a Graceville descendant.

Collaborating in Ireland and Minnesota. Leslie met Bridie Conneely in 2019 at the Carna Emigration Centre while attending a conference on James Hack Tuke. During her visit, Leslie hoped to learn more about her Connemara family and mentioned this in a conversation. The next day Bridie, who lives in Connemara, found and kindly gave Leslie printed copies of her family’s baptismal records. Then in 2021 Bridie joined the Connemara to Minnesota FB group. She was searching for her family members who had disappeared from the records after emigrating to the U.S. Within just a few hours, group member Michael Carlson helped discover that her family had emigrated to Minnesota as part of Archbishop Graceville’s scheme. Bridie’s and Leslie’s families had lived in neighboring towns in Connemara. The icing on the cake was finding an 1885 census record showing their families had become neighbors after emigrating to St. Paul’s West Side Flats.

If your family emigrated from Connemara to Minnesota in this time period, or if you think you have a connection to the Graceville or Tuke Connemara families, we would love to have you in our Facebook group. To join,



Leslie’s great grandparents Mary Flaherty and Michael Hartigan were married June 9, 1895 at St. Michael’s Church in St. Paul’s West Side.

search “Connemara to Minnesota in the 1880s” on Facebook. There are a few questions to answer and most get approved. The group is private to encourage meaningful dialog and keep the focus on our personal and shared experiences. It doesn’t matter where you currently live, we have members from all over the U.S. and many from Connemara. We consider ourselves family who haven’t met yet — and we can’t wait to meet you. We are also hopeful that someday we can commemorate our family’s journey in a memorable way.

Connemara Patch Tour and History: For those who are interested in a walking tour of the Connemara Patch, save the date Saturday July 17, 2021, from 1-3:30. p.m.. To register or for more information, please email Teresa McCormick at mcco81@gmail.com.

For further research consider these excellent resources; Joe Cooke’s incredible 1997 documentary “Graceville: A Documentary of Migration from Connemara to Minnesota.” A copy of this film is located at Celtic Junction Arts Center Library in St. Paul. Bridget Connelly’s “Forgetting Ireland, Uncovering a family’s secret history” provides a detailed and fascinating history of the Graceville Connemara families and will be available in paperback March 17, 2021. Gerard Moran’s “Fleeing from Famine in Connemara: James Hack Tuke and his assisted emigration scheme in the 1880s” is a must read for anyone interested in Tuke’s emigration program and the Forgotten Famine in Connemara.

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Sources

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