Living History: From New Jersey to the Emerald Isle
A Sabbatical Reflection

By Rev. Augustine J. Curley, O.S.B.

As part of a sabbatical I was granted in celebration of my 25th anniversary of ordination, I spent three months in Ireland. I spent the first two weeks in Doolin, County Clare, where I was joined by my sisters and brother, and in-laws. Over the course of the next 12 weeks I spent time in Dublin; in Letterkenny, County Donegal, where I stayed at the parochial house and took my turn presiding at Mass and hearing confessions; in County Galway; and at Glenstal Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in Murroe, County Limerick.

Part of my reason for going to Ireland was to do more family history research and meet with relatives, some of whom I had made contact with previously, others whom I met by going to the place the family came from and asking around. I also engaged in research on the Irish immigration to New Jersey.

In 1814, the powder mill in Belleville exploded, killing a number of Irish immigrants. Several were buried in the cemetery of the Dutch Reformed Church. The place of birth was inscribed on some of the tombstones, although the name inscribed did not correspond to any Irish place that I could find in reference sources. Through the help of a retired archivist from Bantry House whom I met through the Internet, I determined that they had come from Aghanunshin, County Donegal. After consulting Dermot Quinn about where I should go to research these people, I arranged to stay at the cathedral in Letterkenny, since Aghanunshin is part of that parish, and the Donegal County Archives are nearby. Soon after my arrival in Letterkenny, the rector called the local newspaper, who sent a reporter to interview me. When the article appeared, Shaun Doherty, a popular radio talk show host, invited me to appear on his show. As a result of this publicity, I met a brother and sister who are likely relatives of one of the men who died in the explosion. When I went to the Donegal County Library, I found that the local history collection was closed off because of a water leak, and the librarian had given up on predicting when they would be able to open it up again, but she gladly brought down for me titles that she thought would help my search. I had also hoped to get to the Donegal County Archives, but because of cutbacks, there was only one person on staff, and she was on holiday the entire three weeks I was in Letterkenny. The local heritage society had also been shuttered because of cutbacks, but I was given the name of the person who had been the director, and she kindly checked for information about the families I was interested in. She did not find any specific information, but she was able to tell me which were Catholic names, and which Protestant.

While I was in Dublin, I received an e-mail about the cousin of James “Moon” O’Brien, a Belleville policeman. Brendan O’Brien was interested in studying the emigration from his hometown, Bohola, County Mayo, to Belleville. On a visit to Belleville he had noticed the number of headstones in the cemetery at St. Peter’s which bore the names of Bohola families. I got in touch with him, and we met for lunch the next day. We are continuing to cooperate in our investigation.

Before I left for Ireland, I had made contact with a relative on my mother’s side of the family, Tony O’Driscoll of Castletroy, County Limerick. His great-grandfather, Eugene McEnery, and my great-grandfather, Thomas McEnery, were brothers, Thomas settled in Belleville. Tony graciously took me and two of my sisters who were with me at the time, to see the town where the McEnerys originated and
the ruins of the McEnery Castle, and to visit the graveyards that contained the graves of different relatives. We later met other McEnery relatives.

While I was spending a few days in Ballinasloe, County Galway, in Curley country, a local teacher and genealogist, Martin Curley, whom I had met through the Internet, offered to take me to see Keelogues East, a town that I had recently learned was where my paternal grandmother’s family originated. While there, we asked one of the locals if there were any Kilcommonses still in town. We were directed to the house of Michael Kilcommons. When we reached the end of the road, and were not sure which house we were supposed to go to, we called over a man who was trimming hedges and asked him if he knew Michael Kilcommons. He asked “And why would ye be looking for him?” We were speaking with Michael Kilcommons himself. He invited us into his house, where we met his wife Marie. He called his sister Bernadette to come over, and they took us to the local cemetery. I was able to give them information about two brothers of their earliest identified ancestor. They said they knew of the existence of these brothers, Daniel and Thomas, and thought they went to America, but that was all they knew. I was able to tell them that Daniel settled in Chicago and Thomas in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. We continue to keep in touch.

In my days researching at the National Library of Ireland, I found that most of the time I was using material published in the United States. But I did consult one small volume in the manuscripts room that was an Irish tract published in 1802 by Walter Cox, a Dubliner who had spent a few months in the eastern United States, including New Jersey. I also consulted the Calendar of Papers of Dr. Slattery, Archbishop of Cashel and Emly from 1834 to 1857, which included an abstract of a letter from Dr. James Bayley forwarding a donation from Archbishop Hughes of New York for the relief of victims of the famine.

While I did not get to research everything I would have liked, I made contacts that will help as I continue my research.