

Catherine Garvin - Irish Heroine

Dianne McGuinness, New York, U.S.A. brought the hard-wrenching and poignant story told here to my attention and I thought it appropriate to make it available on this website (www.grangeparish.com). Dianne, a magnificent researcher, was responsible (with her husband, Mike) for the article on the Purcell Family of Grange that appears in the Grange Book. Grange is never very far from the minds of Dianne and Mike. Anybody who read the Purcell Family story will immediately appreciate their fascination with and love of Grange and the wider locality. They leave no stone unturned in their quest for more knowledge of the locality where Mike's Irish ancestors lived. It is clear that their family and extended family have also been smitten by their Irish connections. *(photo – McGuinness Family)*



I tell Catherine Garvin's story here, chiefly by bringing together several documented accounts or extracts therefrom that are to be found on the Internet. A web address link is provided in each instance, so that the reader may have easy access to the material. The reader will have no difficulty in joining the dots between the various accounts.

I should point out that Catherine's surname is stated variously as "Gavin" and Garvin" – clearly, it is the same Catherine in all accounts. While Gavin appears to be the surname recorded in the Irish records, it would appear that Catherine used the surname Garvin in the United States. The reasons for the variation are not apparent.

Manuscript Account

A manuscript account by an unknown author is held by the Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection, Allen County Public Library, Fort Wayne, Indiana. It is part of the Catherine Garvin Collection. It is a hand-written account of "*Cornelius Garvin, who was born in the year 1845 in the Townland of Grange Hill in the Parish of Bruff, County of Limerick*".

The manuscript and transcription (as below) may be viewed online at:

<http://contentdm.acpl.lib.in.us/cdm/ref/collection/p16089coll38/id/5008>

While Cornelius (Con) in the article *An Irish Heroine* (below) has the attributed surname of Gavin, in what follows the surname is Garvin. However, a perusal of both story lines is strongly suggestive that Con Gavin and Cornelius Garvin are one and the same person, being the son of the same Catherine, mentioned in both accounts. In fact, it can be stated with certainty that Con and Cornelius were the same man, when one considers the similarity of the story lines – consider: Troy, mental institution and reference to the Draft for the Army, etc.

"Cornelius Garvin was born in the year 1845 in the Townland of Grange Hill in the Parish of Bruff, County of Limerick, Ireland, where his father was the owner of a large and productive fa [tom] of land. In the year 1850 as all are aware one of the most dreadful and devastating famines on record occurred in Ireland and compelled a large number of persons to emigrate from that unhappy country, among others

the Garvin family who sailed from Liverpool in the ship Jazedde, and after a voyage of ~~six~~ [sic] Eight weeks, they landed in the City of New York on the 10th day of January 1851.

“After a short stay in New York they removed to the City of Troy distant 150 miles north of the Metropolis. At this period young Cornelius had arrived at the age of 5 years and was attending the school of the Christian Brothers where he remained until he was 13 years old. A short time after his father was taken ill and on the 5th day of February 1860 he breathed his last.

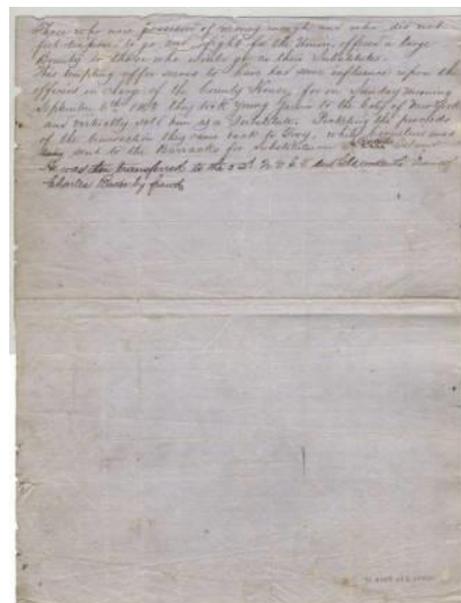
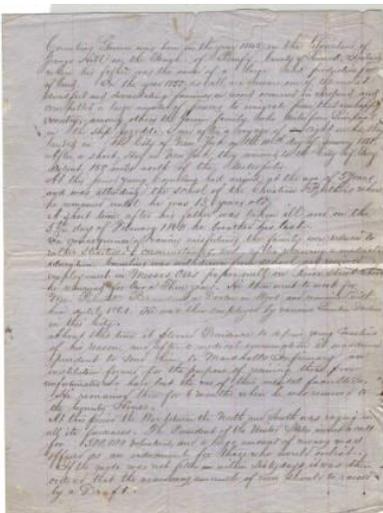
“In consequence of various misfortunes the family were reduced to rather straitened circumstances, and, after receiving a moderate education, Cornelius was removed from school and received employment in Messrs. Orr’s paper mill on River Street where he remained for Two or Three years. He then went to work for Mr. Patrick Brandon, a Dealer in Wood, and remained with him until 1861. He was then employed by various Lumber Dealers in this City.

“About this time it pleased Providence to deprive young Cornelius of his reason, and after, a medical examination it was deemed prudent to send him to Marshalls Infirmary an institution formed for the purpose of receiving those poor unfortunates who have lost the use of their mental faculties. He remained there for 6 months when he was removed to the County House.

“At this period the War between the North and South was raging in all its fierceness. The President of the United States issued a call for 500,000 volunteers, and a large amount of money was offered as an inducement for those who would enlist. If the quota was not filled in within sixty days it was then ordered that the necessary amount of men should be raised by a Draft.

“Those who were possessed of money enough and who did not feel disposed to go and fight for the Union, offered a large Bounty to those who would go as their Substitutes. This tempting offer seems to have had some influence upon the officers in charge of the County House for on Sunday morning September 6th 1863 they took young Garvin to the City of New York and virtually sold him as a substitute. Pocketing the proceeds of the transaction they came back to Troy, while Cornelius was duly sent to the Barracks for Substitutes on ~~Harts~~ [sic] Ricketts Island. He was then transferred to the 52d N.Y.S.V. and held under the name of Charles Barker by fraud.”

The Manuscript



AN IRISH HEROINE

The following piece titled “AN IRISH HEROINE” was published on the *New Zealand Tablet* on 25th December, 1896.

It may be viewed on line at the following web address:

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/periodicals/new-zealand-tablet/1896/12/25/6>

“Some days ago a will suit was tried by Judge Adams at Limerick in which the matter in dispute was the will of an old woman named Catherine Gavin, who died some time since at Bruff, in the County of Limerick. It does not appear to have been mentioned at the trial, says the *Dublin Freeman*, that this poor woman was a heroine whose story forms part of the record of that great tragedy, the American Civil War.

“Her story is told in General Baker’s ‘Secret History of the War’, and in other accounts of the struggle. At the breaking out of the war, Mrs. Gavin was a poor widow at Troy, in New York State, and supporting her family by her industry. She had a son, Con Gavin, who was an idiot [sic]. He was sent to an asylum at Albany, the capital of New York State, and there kindly treated. When a lad in his later teens the supply of men for the Northern Army ran very short and a bounty of £200 was offered for each recruit. All kinds of frauds were practised by ruffians called bounty jumpers. Some of these scoundrels carried off with, it is to be feared, the aid of one of the asylum staff, Gavin and other idiot lads, enlisted them in the Northern Army, and pocketed the bounty.

“Con Gavin was at once sent to the front, and from that time forward no certain trace of him could ever be discovered. The poor mother, on hearing the news, became nearly frantic, and, leaving her work, managed to get to Washington. There she succeeded in obtaining an interview with President Lincoln. The President, who was a most kind-hearted man, gave her letters to some distinguished officers, and then she set out in her great search for ‘Poor Con’.

“It lasted for two years, that is to say up to the end of the war. On two occasions, there was intermission of some months. These were caused by her resources failing. When this happened she went back to Troy, worked hard at daily manual labour, lived on bread and water, and thus saved enough to renew the search.

“In pursuit of her quest, Mrs. Gavin visited every camp of the army from the Mississippi to the Atlantic, inspected every regiment in the service, and searched every military hospital in the country. She soon became known to the soldiers far and wide. There was little resemblance between the poor Irish washerwoman of fifty and Longfellow’s famous heroine ‘*Fair was she to behold, that maiden of seventeen summers*’. And yet both the quests sprang from the same source – love – and Mrs. Gavin’s search after her son was as thorough as that of Evangeline after Gabriel:-

*In seasons and places
Divers and distant far was seen the wandering maiden
Now in the tents of grace of the meek Moravian missions,
Now in the noisy camps and the battlefields of the armies,
Now in secluded hamlets, in towns and populous cities.*

“Many a night and day were spent by Mrs. Gavin in bivouac and battlefield, and she witnessed some of the principal engagements of the great war. Her story passed from the Northern to the Southern lines, and she was permitted to enter the entrenchments of the Confederacy and to search some of its hospitals and prisons.

“When for a moment she rested by some camp fire she would spring up and exclaim ‘*But I must go and look for poor Con*’, and she started forth on her weary round, now passing from bed to bed in a hospital,

now scrutinising with keen eye the soldiers of a regiment, now turning over the corpses of the brave as they lay on the battlefield.

“At one time Mrs. Gavin believed that she had found her son, and an officer was actually put under arrest for concealing traces of his identity. This seems to have ended in nothing. The war cloud over, the fate of Con Gavin was never cleared up.

“When many years after the war, the Pension Act was passed by the Congress, Mrs. Gavin, as the mother of a soldier who had presumably died in the war, was awarded a pension of £40 a year and arrears thereof for several years. It was the arrears which were litigated about in the will suit already mentioned. The will was broken, as the poor woman’s mind had failed in recent years, but she had not forgotten the famous object of her long search. She had left £50 ‘for Masses for the soul of my dear son, Con’.”

The Will Suit

Dianne’s research also discovered a record of the judicial decision, which reads as follows:

“GAVIN Catherine (81) 5 December [1896] Letters of Administration of the personal estate of Catherine Gavin late of Ballygrennan Bruff County Limerick Widow who died 30 April 1896 were granted at Limerick to Michael Cleary of Ballygrennan Farmer the Nephew Effects 356 17s 1d”

The Abraham Lincoln Telegram

It was reported in *The Irish Heroine* account that Catherine obtained an interview with President Lincoln and that he wrote several introductions to army personnel on her behalf. The image of a telegram sent by the President on her behalf is reproduced below as is the transcript of same.

The telegram and information about it may be viewed on line at the following web address:

http://wiki.lincolnteleggrams.com/index.php?title=April_18,_1864

“Executive Mansion

Washington, April 18, 1864

Col. Paul Frank,

of N.Y. 52nd Army of Potomac

Is there, or has there been a man in your Regiment by the name of Cornelius Garvin? And if so, answer me so far as you know, where he now is.

ALincoln”

“Recd 1.35 pm

Sent 3.20 pm

By Nichols”

The Lincoln Telegrams Website notes the following regarding the context and inferences of the telegram:

“The N.Y 52nd Army of Potomac was organized in New York City October, 11 1861. The regiment was the merging of the German Ranger and Sigel Rifles. It was folded into the United States service on October 25, 1861, with Col. Paul Frank commanding. The regiment headed to war on November 2, 1861 and went into camp at Bladensburg, Md., near Washington, D. C. After one month's drill, it marched into Virginia and encamped at Fairfax Seminary, near Alexandria, Va., where it was assigned to the Third Brigade (General French), First Division (General Richardson), Second Corps (General Sumner).

During the time of Lincoln's telegram to Colonel Frank the N.Y. 52nd was preparing to participate in the Wilderness Campaign. Which was a group of battles and skirmishes in Virginia from May 4-June 12, 1864.

A search of the regiment's enlistment records verifies the service of Private Cornelius Garvin in the heavy artillery division. But, Garvin was discharged on November, 23, 1863. Lincoln's interest in the soldier's location stems from the sympathy he felt for Garvin's widowed mother. Catherine Garvin's story of her son who was "sold" to war was passed along from mayors, local politicians, and eventually to President Lincoln. During the Civil War many freed slaves and young boys were abducted and "sold" to the army in order to take the place of a man who was trying to avoid the war.

This telegram shows the sympathetic and caring side of Abraham Lincoln. Ms. Garvin was no more than a washwomen living in poverty but her son's story touched the President, enough that he took the time to inquire about the missing private. It should be noted that Lincoln never received a response from Colonel Frank, and Lincoln never followed up after the initial telegram. One can assume that the private's welfare was not a top priority for Colonel Frank and Lincoln did not have the time to explore this issue further.”

A True Story of a Valiant Mother's Struggle during the Civil War

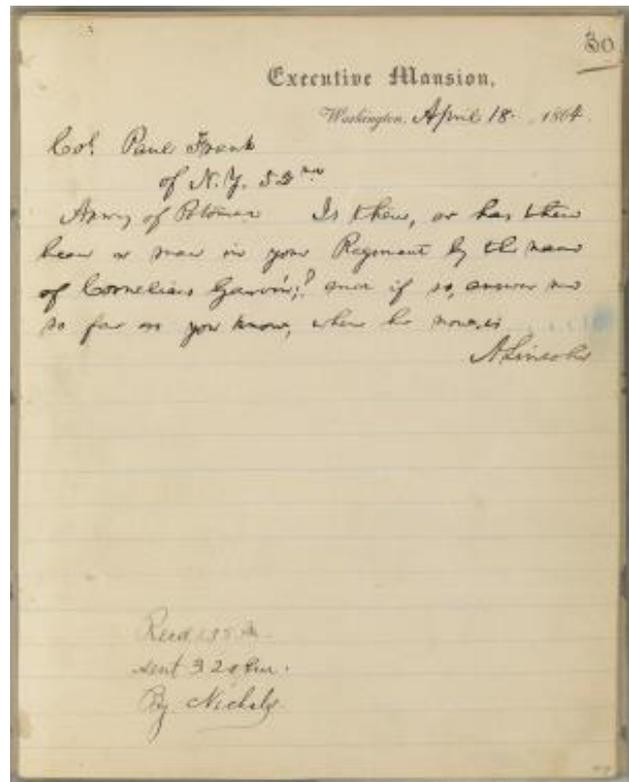
A detailed account of Catherine's quest to find her son, Con, and her subsequent fight to obtain a Pension from the US is set out on the following website – the reader is encouraged to read this account.

<http://contentdm.acpl.lib.in.us/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p16089coll38/id/5172/rec/2>

One of the final paragraphs in this account states:

“A hiatus now occurs in the story. The dates of the collection [of documents] jump from 1868 to 1894. It appears that Mrs Garvin, with no hope left, finally chose to return to Ireland. Her departure brought on further trouble. The correspondence reveals that her pension was suspended on account of her residence outside of the United States. This matter too was cleared. A letter from the pensions office, dated February 6, 1894, states that, as she had been able satisfactorily to established her citizenship of the United States, pension payment had been resumed.”

An array of correspondence / documentation regarding Catherine's quest may be read at the following website – the documents are most interesting.

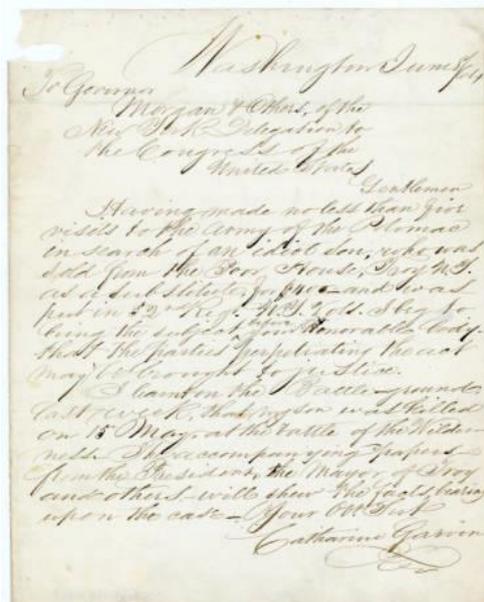


Letters Written by Catherine

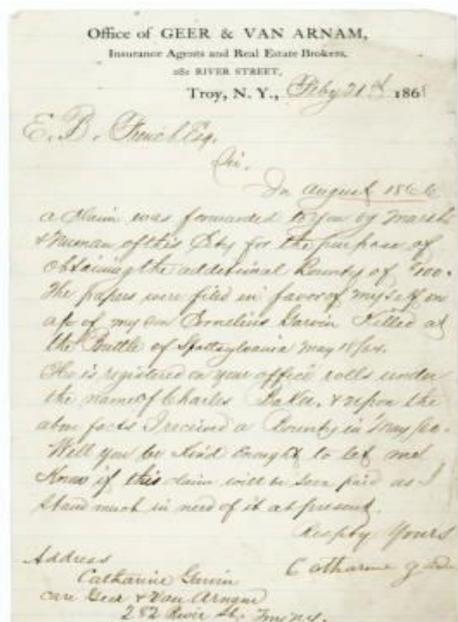
In search of her son, Con, and in pursuit of a pension, Catherine wrote several letters, two of which are reproduced here – images of the letters and their transcripts.

Letter written by Catherine to Governor Morgan and others of the New York delegation to Congress – 1864-06-08:

“Washington June 8/64. To Governor Morgan & Others, of the New York Delegation to the Congress of the United States. Gentlemen Having made no less than five visits to the Army of the Potomac in search of an idiot Son, who was sold from the Poor House, Troy N.Y. as a substitute, for \$400--and was put in 52nd Regt. N.Y. Vols. I beg to bring the subject before your



Honorables body--that the parties perpetrating the act may be brought to justice. I learnt on the Battle-grounds, last week, that my son was killed on 15 May, at the battle of the Wilderness. The accompanying papers from the President, the Mayor of Troy and others, - will shew the facts bearing upon the case—Your Obt. Sev't Catharine Garvin”



Letter from Catherine to E.B. French – 1868-02-21

“Feby 21st 1868 E.B. French Esq. Sir, In August 1866 a claim was forwarded to you by Marsh & Numan of this City for the purpose of obtaining the additional Bounty of \$100. The papers

were filed in favor of myself on a/c of my son Cornelius Garvin killed at the Battle of Spottsylvania May 18/64. He is registered on your office rolls under the name of Charles Baker, & upon the above facts I received a Bounty in May /66. Will you be kind enough to let me know if this claim will be soon paid as I stand much in need of it at present. Resply Yours Catharine Garvin. Address Catharine Garvin care Geer & Van Arnam 282 River St. Troy, N.Y.”

Conclusion

After reviewing the archival documents, few will disagree that Catherine Garvin was a force to be reckoned with: a brave and resourceful Grange woman who left no stone unturned in her quest to seek out her son, Con, who had been abducted from his sheltered home by unscrupulous persons in pursuit of easy money – the result of which he was thrown headlong into action in war, a predicament that, under his circumstances, he could not have been remotely prepared to survive. He died on the battlefield. No doubt, the United States provided many comforts to the victims of the Irish Famine – no so for Catherine and Con.

I am indebted to Dianne and Mike McGuinness for bringing Catherine’s story and, indeed, her son Cornelius’s life story to the people of Grange and beyond.

ENDS

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