

"Coming from Warsaw, New York, that farm was located at the Portageville end of Letchworth State Park. Or better still, when you are in the Park, at the Mary Jemison - The White Woman of the Genesee Monument - a look to the left will disclose an old dirt road that has been closed off to the public. That road would have lead you to the main buildings of the old Conway Farm. That farm became the nucleus of ...Letchworth State Park. That road was followed by my Grandmother Dundon and me, when I was a boy, to the old farmhouse which was still standing, as were some of the out buildings."

My father wrote these words in 1984. They were the opening remarks in a short history of his great-Grandfather James Conway who emigrated to the U.S. from Ireland in 1849. This brief introduction to my Father's genealogy on his Mother's side started me on a marvelous journey of discovery of my roots.

I had always been intrigued at Dad's stories about the farm that lay up the hill on that old dirt road near the Mary Jemison statue. I suppose his statement that it was closed off to the public always kept me from pursuing the story any further. The family history he left us after his death renewed my interest to the point that I had to at least go to Letchworth Park and take a look. October 7, 1990 turned out to be the perfect day to explore the high trail that started at the small parking lot near the Mary Jemison statue. My wife, Holly, was as excited as I was, so together with our three children, Anne, Joe and John, we headed to Letchworth to take a look.

We arrived at the park shortly after lunch, and decided that, instead of approaching the farm from the direction of the Mary Jemison statue, we would enter instead from the direction of the Erie railroad high bridge. Dad had written in another part of his story that he remembered "crossing

over the bridge, after the old wooden bridge burned, with Grandma..." I remember Dad recalling that, if you followed that railroad bed into the park, you would come upon the Conway Farm. We parked the car near the Erie railroad high bridge that extends over the gorge and headed up the hill to the railroad bed. Armed with a map of Letchworth Park's trails and roads, we walked along the railroad bed into the park. It was a beautiful fall day, remarkably warm for October, and I remember we all shed our jackets before we went too far. We were looking for old foundations or signs of any sort that we were indeed on an old farm, but to our dismay we found none. We were, however, quite sure that we were on the old Conway property. We just didn't know where the boundaries were or where the old homestead might have been. It was then that Molly and I decided that we were going to have to do some primary research to find out more about the location of the Conway farm. We promised to get busy that winter and write some letters to the Letchworth State Park Administration and see what they might know about old farms bordering the Letchworth Estate.

The holiday season was soon upon us, so we did not get to writing our first letter until after the first of the year. We had obtained the name of the Park Administrator, Tom Breslin and wrote him a letter. We requested any information he might have concerning the farm of James Conway, purportedly on the Letchworth Estate circa 1890-1910. What we received in the mail a week later exceeded our wildest expectations.

Mr. Breslin had referred our request to the Park Engineering Department. Mr. Foote, the park engineer, researched our request with typical rural hospitality. The documents he sent to us in a large mailing envelope consisted of several maps. The largest map was a survey map of the Letchworth Estate. This map was drawn in 1907,

but the survey information that the map was created from had been gathered in 1890. On the map in bold letters just above the hill from the Letchworth Estate was the inscription "**J. CONWAY.**" The Conway farm was there, right where Dad had said it was! Not that we didn't trust Dad's memory. It just seemed very exciting to have this segment of our family history confirmed in writing, and on such an old document. We were hooked on discovering our family histories, my wife and I, and promised to continue our search as a family hobby.

We spent the following weeks looking very carefully at the maps that Mr. Foote sent us, gleaning any information we could from them. We figured that the farm was at least 75 acres in size, perhaps more, but that was hard to determine from the information we had in front of us at the time. It also appeared that there were two structures on the property at the time of the 1907 map, just up the high trail that Dad had said led to the main buildings of the Conway farm. We couldn't stand it any longer, and in mid-February, on a somewhat dreary day, Molly and I packed up the boys in the Suburban once again. We were off for another look at the property, newly informed and reassured of success by the maps that Mr. Foote had sent us six weeks earlier.

We had never been at Letchworth in the winter time, and even though it was overcast with a light snow falling, the Park had a certain grandeur to it. We entered through the Castile entrance, as the Portageville entrance was closed in the winter, perhaps because the road follows so closely to the Upper Falls that it ices over quite easily from the mist. We were only able to drive as far as the monument on the main Park road just below the maintenance buildings and above the road that leads down to the Glen Iris. We put our down jackets on and ate a light snack on the tailgate in preparation for our long winter's hike.

A small sled served the dual role of keeping the boys entertained and rested at the same time, as we had a long trail ahead of us.

The road down to the Glen Iris was snow covered and icy, and appeared quite different from that summer highway we had become quite familiar with. We were not headed as far as the Glen Iris, but would take the road to the right just past the stone bridge that led up to the Mary Jemison statue. It was our usual practice to drive up this road, and we found that it was quite an exerting hike due to the snow and the steep grade of the hill. All the while I had a copy of the 1907 survey map in my hands, trying to match up the landmarks of nearly 100 years ago with the current landscape. Our wintry walk made it more and more apparent how beautiful it must have been in the Genesee Valley in the nineteenth century, and the landscape, covered with snow on that cold February afternoon, was quickly transformed in our minds to a vista of 100 years past. We proceeded up the road, onto the Conway Farm (my map said so), looking for the first trail that came off to our left. The map indicated that up that road we could find the evidence that we were looking for.

The steep grade continued up the hill, and to our left was evidence of stone walls along the roadside shoring up the steep hillside. Whether these walls had been put up by the Park maintenance men or by our Conway forebears was impossible to tell, but we considered them as evidence of a former farm site. (**Editors note:** Most probably these were made during the depression years by the C.C.C.) We made a left turn at the first roadway and headed up the old road that branched off there. We noticed on either side of the road old maple trees, the kind you see lining the streets of southern tier towns like Arcade and Franklinville. If we closed our eyes, we could picture the old farm just ahead in the

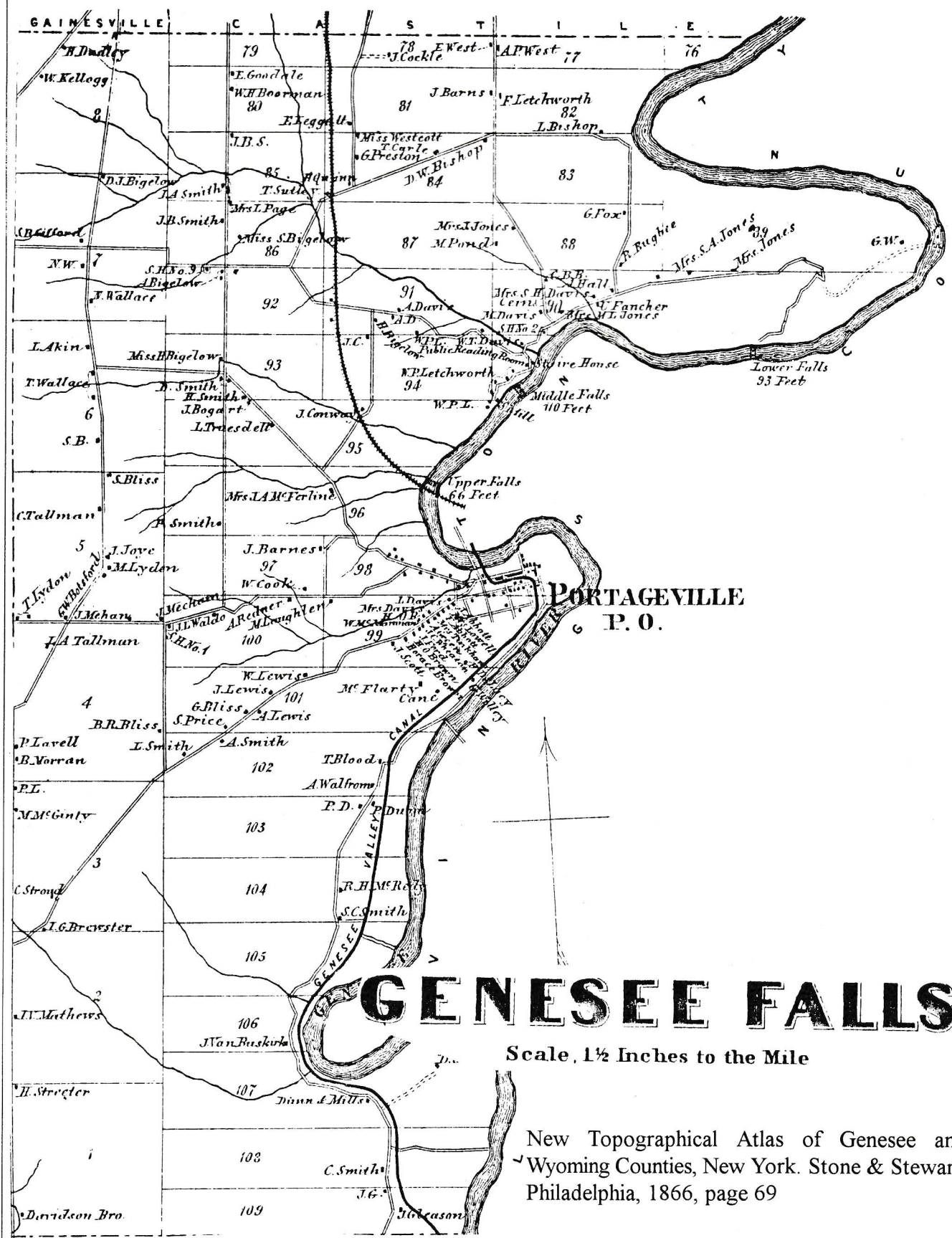
clearing to the right. We felt sure that we had found the homestead location. It was on high ground, well drained and well forested, but the clearing was evident. There were several mounds of debris, well overgrown with brush but conspicuously absent of large trees. All around the clearing were old growth maple and pine, noticeably larger than the trees that the park had planted during the early twentieth century reforestation of Letchworth. We were sure we had found the spot we had been looking for.

We rummaged around in the pile of debris, which looked more like an overgrown pile of topsoil than a ruined homestead. We dug around the weeds in the snow as best we could, and came up with an old pail. A little bit beyond the pail was an old tank of some sort, rusted through from the years it had been exposed to the elements. We continued walking around the property and soon noticed that the road wound around and slightly downward, so we followed it back to the main trail. Shortly we were upon the underpass of the Erie Railroad line that ran through the property. We turned around and looked back at the area we had dubbed "the homestead" and could see the faint outline of the old road that ran up to the main house from the direction of the underpass. We had gained some more knowledge and familiarity in our search, and would now return home to let it all sink in for a while longer. We promised to return in spring to further explore for more clues to our family's past. Little did we realize at this time that we would later learn this very site was the land referred to in James Conway's will as "the homestead."

We had answered many questions in a relatively short period of time regarding the Conway story which my Dad had left us. Still, many questions remained unanswered. The most intriguing for our family was how did the Conway's come to lose the beautiful piece of land

that lay up the hill from the Glen Iris? Dad maintained that Great-Great Grandfather Conway had sown the seeds of dissent among the Conway children in his will when he left his estate to the three boys and excluded the three daughters. The story went that if the Conway sons, James Jr., Jeremiah and Patrick would stay on and work the farm, unmarried until their father's death, they would inherit the property to the exclusion of the three daughters, Bridget, (Dad's grandmother), Kate (Catherine), and Elizabeth. Furthermore, Dad said that the girls protested the will all the way to the Court of Appeals, New York States highest court. The property was sold to pay court fees, and at that time Dad assumed that Letchworth purchased the property as part of his land acquisitions to create Letchworth State Park. It was quite a story, and an enticing one too, but where else could we go for more information to solve the mystery? The answer to many of these questions was to be provided by John Wilson, Wyoming County Historian.

I don't remember when we first heard of John Wilson, whether it was the folks at Letchworth State Park or someone else who put us on to him. We wrote the first letter to John shortly after our winter trip to the park in February of 1991. Along with the letter requesting information on John Conway Sr.'s will we enclosed a copy of Dad's Conway-Dundon "Dynasty" story, carefully changing the Dynasty portion of the heading to "History." After all, we did not want to seem too pretentious by attempting to turn our noble farmer ancestors into kings and queens. The letter that John returned about six weeks later again was a prime example of rural hospitality. Mr. Wilson's letter began like this... "I'm sorry to be slow in answering your letter, sometimes (things) are a bit busy here and I put off going to the (Wyoming County) Court House."



He then went on to explain that he included information on the 1850, 1860, 1870 and 1880 census', a copy of James Conway's will, and records of four land purchases made by James Conway from 1853 to 1866. He also sent us a copy of a map of Genesee Falls in 1866 which showed where the Conway land was located. He closed his letter, a goldmine of information for a budding genealogist, like this... "I hope that the above is of some worth to you, I think that we should ask \$5 for the time required in the search."

Well, we had enough information here to keep us busy for months, and it did. First, there was the census information. Dad had said that Bridget Conway, his grandmother, had come over to the U.S. in 1846, based on her age at death and the assumption that she was three years old when she came here. Consistent with this information, the James Conway family is absent from the 1850 census, but appears for the first time in the Genesee Falls census of 1860. Among the family members is 16 year old Bridget. This age for Bridget is probably in error, considering what else we know about her at this time. Her birth date is listed as February 5, 1845 according to the Limerick Archives in Ireland and her death certificate in 1939 says she was born on February 2, 1846. This would make her 14 or 15 at the time of the 1860 census, but we know how girls fool about their age.

In fact, census records were often approximate when it came to ages, some individuals gaining or losing a few years each 10 year period. This explains why James Conway Sr. was 45 at the 1860 census, 67 at the 1870 census, and 70 at the 1880 census, when his true age for those years would have been 52 and 62 and 72, respectively (the inscription on his tombstone indicates he died in 1889 at the age of 81.) This brings up an interesting notion, however, that the age listed on his tombstone in St. Mary's

cemetery in Portageville was incorrect, and that he may have been born a few years earlier or later than 1808, 1815 according to the 1860 census, 1803 according to the 1870 census or 1810 by the 1880 census. At any rate, we know that James was at least 74 at his death on April 3rd 1889, although he could have been as old as 86.

Enough for now about ages, for isn't our true interest that mysterious piece of property in Letchworth State Park. How big was the farm? How many buildings did it have on it? How did James Conway come to acquire his property? How did the Conways get to America? The answers for many of these questions came from John Wilson, and from subsequent research done by my wife and I at the Wyoming County seat in Warsaw, New York. I might also add that oral tradition, courtesy of Norm Kirchgraber, provides some of the color in the following account. I will attempt to weave the dry historical dates of births and land purchased into an enjoyable account of our Irish ancestors. This story is ours, but could easily belong to countless others whose ancestors came to the New World in search of a better life.

James Conway and his wife, Elizabeth Walsh Conway, entered the U.S. around 1849. The economic conditions in Ireland were worsening at this time, and the notorious potato famine of 1845-1847 was having its effect on the countryside. We could find no records to show that James and his wife were landowners in Ireland, but they may have lived on a family farm consisting of 10 acres in Ballynahallee in the parish of Kildimo. Kildimo is located about six or seven miles west of Limerick City. The lot was shared by Patrick Conway (James' brother), Catherine Connell and Mary Conway. The relationship of these last two to James is unknown. There were three houses on the lot, so one can imagine how little room was left for growing crops to feed an increasing family.

James Conway married Elizabeth Walsh in Kildimo on February 17, 1844, in the presence of James Walsh and Edmond Cagney. On February 5, 1845, church records show the birth of Bridget, followed on March 7, 1847 by the birth of Honora. Consistent with emigration to the U.S. in 1849, the Irish Church records fall silent on the Conways after the birth of Honora in 1847.

According to oral tradition, the Conways entered the New World via Canada, possibly through the St. Lawrence River. There was smallpox on the ship, and young Bridget for sure and perhaps her baby sister Honora was affected by this dreaded disease on the voyage over. As was customary in those days, "fever ships" were sent to the St. Lawrence and moored offshore until the disease aboard the ship ran its course. My Dad, Norm Kirchgraber, said that Bridget carried the scars of smallpox on her face until the day she died. The fact that Honora does not appear in the records of the 1860 census suggests that she may not have survived the harsh journey over, perhaps losing her young life to smallpox. We may never know for certain.

After landing in the New World, the Conways made their way south to the fertile lands of the Genesee Valley. My Dad wrote that the trip to Portageville was made by oxcart, although it is also likely that they came down the Genesee Valley Canal, which stretched from Rochester to Olean and beyond by the time the Conways came to the States.

The first significant event of record that happened to the Conways after arriving was the birth of Jeremiah in December of 1850. The exact date of his birth is unknown at this time. Again, the 1860 census records conflict with the birth dates in the family records, placing Jeremiah's age at the time of the census at 7 years.

Exactly where the family lived in their first years is unknown, but by March of 1853, just seven months after completion of the wooden high bridge over the Genesee River, James and Elizabeth purchased their first property, 1/4 acre from Nathaniel Gardner for \$20.00. The property was in the Town of Genesee Falls, and through subsequent research we believe it is located on Lot 95, northeast of the point where the Erie Railroad crosses an old spring brook. Whether James Conway labored on the bridge is not known, but if he did, it is possible that the money he earned on this project went to pay for his first piece of land. We know that Irish immigrants worked on the bridge from Irene Beales' account of the Irish labor riot in 1851 on page 93 of her book, **William P. Letchworth, A Man For Others**. Ms. Beales writes that the Irish labor riot was due to "pay of six and a half cents an hour, a workday from 4 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., and harsh treatment by the bosses."

John Wilson, in a letter written to me in the spring of 1991, says he believed the dollar amount of this first purchase was recorded in error, and that it could have been a house and lot.

In July of 1993, on a tour of the Conway property conducted by Doug Bassett, Park naturalist, attendees of the Conway Family reunion visited this site. Although there is no evidence of a foundation 140 years later, remnants of an old apple orchard can be seen, as well as the old ceramic and stone work culvert that still carries the springbrook under the old roadway. After visiting the site, it is clear to see that it was an ideal location for a homestead, conveniently located at the intersection of the roadway leading to Route 19, the Erie Railroad, and a brook that to this day is a continual source of fresh spring water.

James and Elizabeth continued to add to

their family and their homestead, as the records show the birth of Kate in 1855 (month and day as yet unknown), and the purchase of 25 acres of land in lot 91 from Rial Botsford for \$400 on December 1, 1856. Two years later, in 1858, another son, Patrick was born. On August 15, 1859, the Estate of George B. Chase sold 11.39 acres of land to James Conway for \$432.82. I believe this was the same George B. Chase whose son John died of cholera in 1852 when an ox that George donated for the barbecue celebrating the opening of the wooden bridge caused the poisoning deaths of several people who attended the ceremonies (*Historical Wyoming, Volume 28 page 17*).

On October 30, 1860, William P. Letchworth sold unspecified acreage to James Conway for \$62.00. It was likely a small piece of land adjoining their two properties for which the Conways had more use than Mr. Letchworth. The records then fall silent for several years on land purchases by the Conways. On April 12, 1861, the Civil War broke out. The Conways continued to farm their modest 37 acres, adding to their family during those terrible years of national strife. On November 2, 1862, Patrick Conway was born. Late in 1863, Elizabeth was born. James was now 55, his wife probably in her forties.

As the Civil War approached its final months, Patrick Brogan of Genesee Falls sold 16.5 acres of farmland on lot 94 to James Conway. When the war ended on April 9, 1865, the Conway farm consisted of over 53 acres, and most likely contained two homesteads and various out buildings. James Conway and his wife Elizabeth had, in the short span of 16 years, achieved the American dream, and now owned property that surpassed the acreage of their Irish homestead fivefold. But the dream was still growing.



Michael & Bridget (Conway) Dundon
circa 1890

In the late winter of 1866, James Conway approached his oldest daughter, Bridgette, with a man she had never seen before. Michael Dundon was an Irish immigrant like herself, about six or seven years her senior, and unlike Bridgette, who spoke English with but a slight brogue, Michael was not yet a naturalized citizen. My father tells the story like this:

“When Grandma was 16 (my mother and Grandma always had a dispute as to whether she was 16 or 18 at the time, Mother claiming 16 and Grandma 18), her father called to her one day and had a man with him. He said “Bridginne, I want you to meet Michael Dundon, your future husband. You will be married 30 days from now.” My mother said she was frightened and hid in the barn but 30 days from that date they were married, in the Assumption Church at Portageville.” (April 28, 1866) It was a good marriage too, lasting 53 years until Michael’s death on June 5, 1919. Bridgette outlived Michael by 20 years, her death also in June, on the 17th in 1939.