

# CONNELLY Family

The potato blight, which devastated the lowly innocuous tuber that had been the pauper's main source of food in Ireland since the 1700s, was the beginning of a long line of disasters that led to the death of over one million people in Ireland in the 1840s. The foremost result of the blight was famine and disease, much of which was caused by bad politics, and after four years of this famine, there were very few tenants able to grow crops on the land owned by the landlords. This in turn led to debt for the landlords because they were unable to collect the rents that were owed to them by these same tenants.

"Many of these landlords, desperate for cash, decided they wanted to grow wheat or graze cattle and sheep on their estates. But they were prevented from doing so by the scores of tiny potato plots and dilapidated huts belonging to penniless tenants who had not paid rent for months, if not years. In the landlords minds in order for them to save their estates from ruin, the paupers would simply have to go."<sup>1</sup>

"During the Famine period, an estimated half-million Irish were evicted from their cottages. One method of removal involved applying for a legal judgment against the male head of a family owing back-rent. After the local barrister pronounced judgment, the man would be thrown in jail and his wife and children dumped out on the streets. A 'notice to appear' was usually enough to cause most pauper families to flee, and they were handed out by the hundreds."<sup>2</sup>

The Connelys lived in County Roscommon during this time. They were tenants on the Strokestown Estate owned by the Mahon family. Dennis appears in the yearly rent roll on 1 Nov 1824 in Ballinafad (which is about 3 miles south of Strokestown).<sup>3</sup> Dennis and his wife Winifred Nolan were both born in the parish of Lisanuffy. It is believed that Dennis' father was the son of Thomas Connelly who came from County Ulster in northern Ireland. The family is said to have left northern Ireland and settled in Roscommon about 1750 because of religious persecution by Protestants.<sup>4</sup>

Elizabeth Connelly, a daughter who was about 13 when the family left Ireland, didn't remember the family as being poor. She remembers her mother, Winifred, handing out food to the starving people in the streets and bringing an old women who was starving to death into their home and caring for her.

Their landlord, Major Dennis Mahon, is infamous for his "coffin ships". He evicted all of his tenants when they couldn't pay their rents and shipped them all off to American. The Connelys were one of many families who were victims of this despicable undertaking.

At this time in history the laws governing British ships were very lax. They were only required to supply 7 lbs. of food per week per passenger, as it was assumed they would bring along their own food for the journey. But most of the Irish boarding these ships were paupers and could not afford food of their own, they depended entirely on the pound-a-day handout which amounted to starvation rations.



Irish emigrants depart Liverpool for North America.

Pictorial Times - 1846

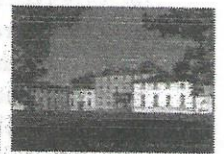
"Many of the passengers were already ill with typhus as they boarded the ships. Before boarding, they had been given the once-over by doctors on shore who usually rejected no one for the trip, even those seemingly on the verge of death. British ships were not required to carry doctors. Anyone that died during the sea voyage was simply dumped overboard, without any religious rites."

"Belowdecks, hundreds of men, women and children huddled together in the dark on bare wooden floors with no ventilation, breathing a stench of vomit and the effects of diarrhea amid no sanitary facilities. On ships that actually had sleeping berths, there were no mattresses and the berths were never cleaned. Many sick persons remained in bare wooden bunks lying in their own filth for the entire voyage, too ill to get up."



A starving boy and girl in Cork hoping to find a potato.

Illustrated London News - 1847



Strokestown house. The stables of this property later became the famine museum.



Inside the famine museum.