

149 years later, Civil War letters in attic reveal a famine Irish immigrant's life

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If Ellen Alden's daughter Jillian hadn't asked to see a photo of her in elementary school, who knows whether the letters of her great-great-grandfather Florence Burke would ever have emerged.

But she did, and it was thanks to this question, asked on an otherwise ordinary day three years ago, that Ellen made the discovery of a lifetime, one with wide-ranging reverberations for herself and her family and for our larger understanding of what it meant to be an **Irish immigrant fighting in the American Civil War**.

Among a number of cardboard boxes Ellen's parents had left at her home in Andover, MA before moving to Hawaii, there was an old leather box. Inside the box there was a note that read, "In memory of my dear Husband Michael J Burke, the keepsakes of his father," three tintype photographs, and a carefully folded stack of hand-written letters.

The 19 letters were all from Florence Burke, her Irish great-great-grandfather on her father's side, who had died fighting for the Union Army in the Civil War. Coincidentally enough, they were all addressed to "Ellen," his wife and Alden's namesake and great-great-grandmother. Florence or Flor is a widely used male name in parts of **County Cork**.



Florence Burke in his Union Army uniform. Courtesy of Ellen Alden.

They cataloged his time fighting with the army – from his departure, which caused great upset in his family, to his first days on the battlefield, to his waning optimism as he realized the war would continue longer than he anticipated and the possibility that he would never return home became more and more real. A later letter, written as he prepared to go into battle, reveals his own premonition that he will not live and the letter’s tone reflects that. General Grant inspects the troops before the battle and Flor knows a deadly fight looms ahead.

An excerpt, from another letter written on March 4, 1864, exemplifies the poignant emotion that runs throughout Florence’s correspondence.

“In earnest I have commenced the life of a soldier. We were forced to march quick time eighteen miles to a place called James City (In Virginia --ed) where we bivouacked at night in an open lot. It is there that I slept under the stars, wondering if you or the boys were looking up at the same brilliant sky.”

“On my arrival to camp I found a letter from you containing your well-known features and that of the children. Mingled tears of joy and sadness welled up

to my eyes. Joy at seeing through the medium of a picture the features of those I hold so near and dear to my heart, but sadness to think they were not true nature itself that they might speak to cheer my drooping spirits. But thanks be to God the sight of them, though mute, shall even be a beacon to urge me on to duty.”

“Florence was writing to his wife and children at home in West Springfield, Mass,” Ellen explains. “I researched his life for a year and discovered he was from County Cork and fled the **Potato Famine** in 1848 at just 19 years old. He came over on a boat, lived in the rough **Five Points area of New York** for a little, and then, when he had a family to take care of, he worked as a tenant farmer in West Springfield until signing up with the Union Army.



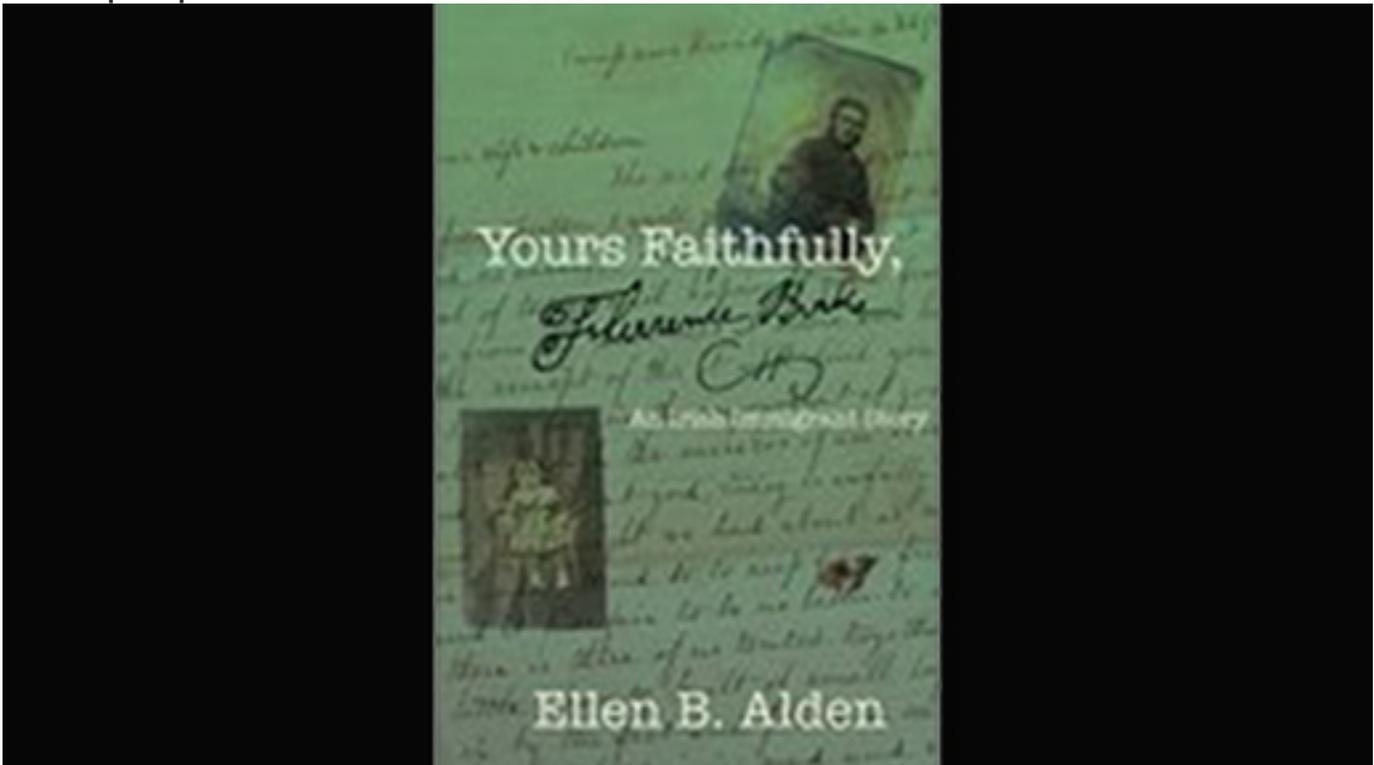
Florence at age 19 (right), his brother (middle) and an unidentified friend or relative, photographed in New York. Courtesy of Ellen Alden.

“He enlisted as a ‘substitute’ for a wealthy man in exchange for a portion of farmland for his family. He made the ultimate sacrifice but benefited his wife and children and the next generations of Burkes.”

Ellen knew she needed to honor Florence, do something big and meaningful with the letters.

“The story is interesting because we all know the Irish struggled to gain respect and to survive here, and some made unbelievable sacrifices,” she told IrishCentral. “My great, great grandfather Florence Burke was one of these people, and I was fortunate enough to find a piece of my past, a window into life in the time of the great emigration.”

But rather than simply creating a timeline of his life story, she wanted to create a vehicle for all the rich biographical and emotional details the letters revealed about Florence and his family, one that would be able to reach a lot of people.



Courtesy of Ellen Alden.

Three years later (one for extensive research in the US and Ireland; one for writing and one for editing), Ellen has published **“Yours Faithfully, Florence Burke: An Irish Immigrant Story”**, an historical fiction novel that weaves Florence’s letter and the facts she discovered about his and Ellen’s lives, into a detailed telling of their journeys from Ireland to America, Florence’s ultimate sacrifice for his family, and Ellen’s incredible strength as she held the family and home together during Florence’s absence and following his death.

For the research phase, she started where most people interested in their predecessors do – talking with her parents and scouring Ancestry.com’s database. Then, as soon as their three kids were done with school for the year, Ellen and her husband Michael took them to Ireland so that she could see Florence’s home county of Cork.

It was there, in a tiny two-pubs-one-church town called Ballinhassig that she met local historian John L. O’Sullivan, who gave her a clearer image of what leaving famine-era Ireland would have meant for her great-great-grandfather. He also served as one of her earliest readers, receiving drafts in the mail and sending pages back with his thoughts and suggestions scrawled in the margins. Her parents were also valuable resources – her mother’s a research librarian and her father taught Irish studies courses.



Ballinhassig historian John L. O'Sullivan and Ellen Alden. Courtesy of Ellen Alden.

Over the course of her writing, she developed even more pride in Florence and Ellen, in their sacrifice and resilience.

“I have so much respect for them,” she told [IrishCentral](#). “He took a gamble, going to the war so that his family could have land and become citizens of the town, and he died for it. But when you look at the future generations, you can see it paid off. His son’s children all became professionals – they went to good schools like Brown and Boston University. They went to law

school, they became judges, dentists, worked for the government. “He wasn’t fighting for glory or for a cause, he just wanted his family to do better. And to see that from the first-person perspective, where he’s talking about praying for the other side too, about only killing people so that he could survive, it’s amazing.

“This is the story of millions of **Irish immigrants** and immigrants from around the world – it’s a story of survival. I just feel blessed to know what he felt and thought, and to be able to share that with other people.”



Ellen with her daughter, Jillian, at Florence's memorial in West Springfield, which they finally found and visited last Memorial Day.

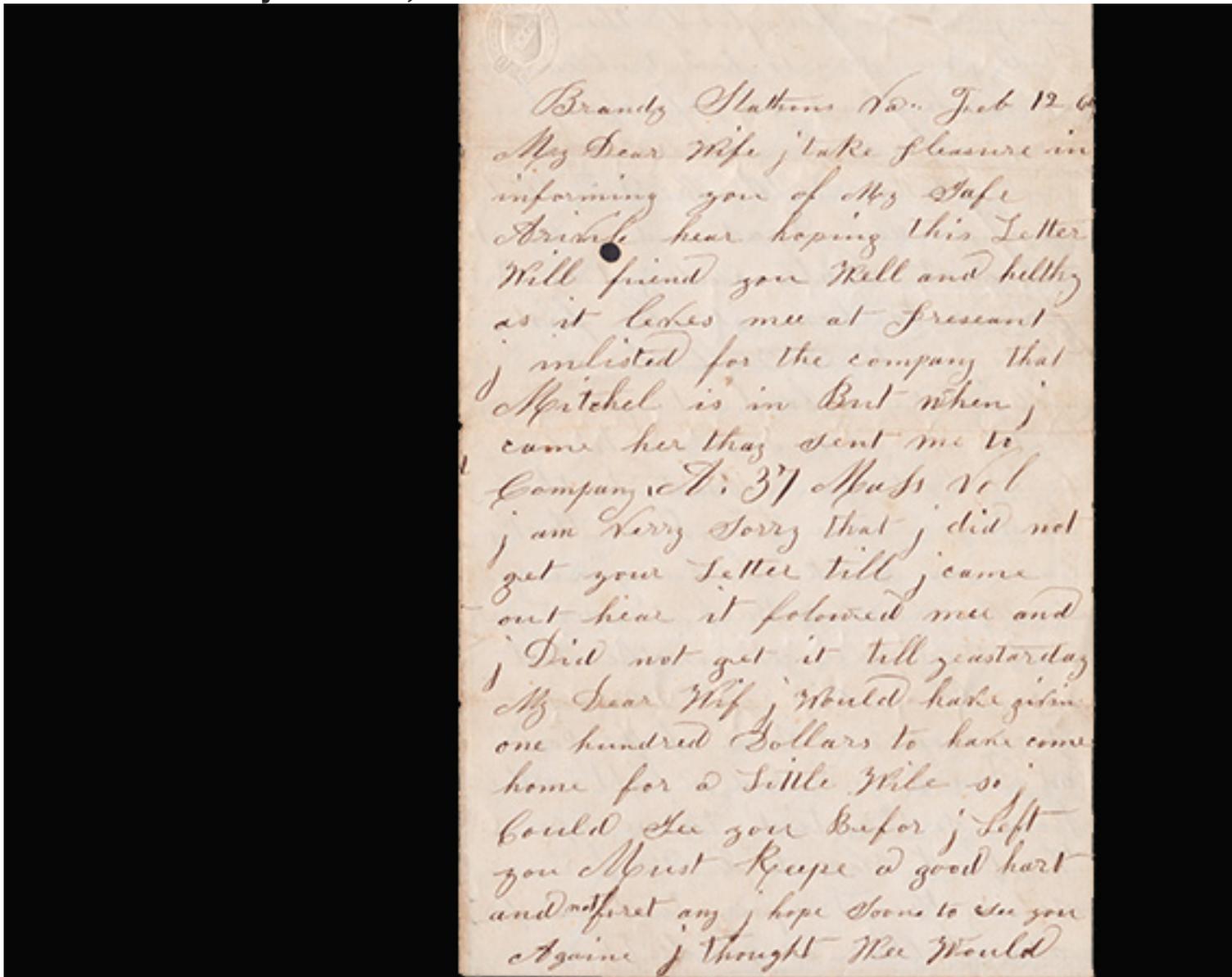
Indeed, an estimated 150,000 Irish fought with the Union in the Civil War; 25,000 on the Confederate side, making them one of the most important immigrant groups in the conflict.

Ellen’s hope for the book, she told IrishCentral, is that it will appeal to a range of readers, from **Irish Americans** and **Civil War** buffs, to readers who love history and strong female characters. She is also in talks with local high schools, offering the book as a supplement to their US history curriculum.

“**Yours Faithfully, Florence Burke**” is available for purchase via **Amazon** and **Barnes & Noble**, and in celebration of the launch party, which takes place in Andover Bookstore today, Ellen has shared three of Florence’s letters with IrishCentral.

The letters of Florence Burke to his wife, Ellen Burke.

Letter #4 Brandy Station, Va. Feb. 12 1864



Brandy Station Va. Feb 12 64
My Dear Wife; take pleasure in
informing you of My safe
Arrival hear hoping this Letter
Will find you Well and healthy
as it leaves me at present
I enlisted for the company that
Mitchel is in But when I
came here they sent me to
Company A, 37 Mass Vol
I am very sorry that I did not
get your Letter till I came
out hear it followed me and
I did not get it till yesterday
My Dear Wife; I would have given
one hundred Dollars to have come
home for a little while so I
could see you before I left
you must keep a good heart
and forget any hope I have to see you
again I thought I would

Courtesy of Ellen Alden.

My Dear Wife I take pleasure in informing you of my safe arrival hear hoping this letter will find you well and healthy as it leaves me at present I enlisted for the company that Mitchel is in But when I came here they sent me to Company A, 37 mass Vol I am very sorry I did not get your letter till I came out hear It followed me and I did not get it till yesterday my Dear Wife I

would have given one hundred dollars to have come home for a little while so I could see you before I left you must keep a good heart and not fret any I hope soon to see you

*Again I thought we would stay longer in Long Island then we did I am sorry to have troubled you so much about my furlough you must be shure when you settle with mr. Day that you get a new [deed] and have it all first rate and get a lawyear to have it all First Rate so thair will be no mistake about it I am sorry that I am not at home to see to it but you must do the best you can [T]he boat that I came on broke her ingine so we had to go back to new york and then we got another boat for Alexixandra (can't read) and came by Fort Monrow Some of the boys got drunk and had a fight on the boat so they tied them up the cook was tied up for selling the Liequire to them for one dollar a glass they whare tied up by the hand to the [rigging] so that their feet did not touch the deack I have not tasted any Liequire since I left and I don't intend to till I come home let me know how the boys are getting a long and if they obay you tell Jerry and Mike to be good boys and I will send them something next pay day you must make yourself as comfortable as you can and anything you nead you can get it let me know how Father and Mother get along I herd she fell and hurt her self let me know how Dan Sheehan and family are getting along and is their baby well I wish you would get your foratrate [spelling, can't read-portrait] taken and the babbys and send them to me is Cornelius Kelehar well James is well also Jacob Unger give my love to all my friends and write soon when you write direct to Florence Burke Company A. 37 Regiment Mass voluntears Washington DC No more at present this from your affectionate husband
Florence Burke*

Save this so you will know where to direct.

Letter#10 Camp of 37th Mass March 13th 1864

My Dear Wife,

I just received yours of the 9th last night and was glad to hear from you as I always am, but as I enjoy tip top health you must not fret a bit about me nor blame anyone but myself for my being here away from you, for no one enticed me to enlist-nor should I have enlisted but to avoid the draft which I felt shure would take place and gobble me up and I be compelled to go from home and get no pay for it, but as I now see the draft is not likely to take

place I am sorry I was in such a hurry for I might have been at home with you but it is now too late to cry for spilled milk and we must both keep up good courage and all yet be well, if you will be the worse of for you are the main dependence for yourself and children so for god sake keep up good courage until we meet again for I feel and trust in god we shall live to see each other in good health, you don't let me know anything that is going on at home you did not tell me whether you sold the hay or if you calculate to sell it or what you are going to do and whether you have paid up for the place which if you have not I wish you would do as soon as you can and when you get what is really necessarily should be done I wish you would try and get a girl to help you do your work and do what running around you want done so you won't have to walk around much and distress your back, my Dear Wife it for you and the children that I am worrying day and night, I wish you would let me know in your next if you have got the State Aid yet and how much you got, I have got so much clothing it will be impossible for me to carry them with me on a march and I shall try to send them home for the summer and get them again in the Fall but if I can't send them home I shall have to throw them away, I wish you would write to me every Sunday and let me know the truth about your health and the children, you can do just as you have a mind to about answering John's letter please your self about it and it will please me, I am going on guard tonight for the first time and it is getting late I must close as I can't find anything more to write about this time give my love to Mary Tobin Mr. Sheehan the Begleys families and all the neighbors with the largest share for yourself and the children so good bye for this time. Your True Husband,

Florence Burke

Letter # 14 Camp of the 37th Mass April 19th 1864

Camp of 37th Mass April 19th 1864

My Dear Wife

Hoping this will find you in good health I send you these few lines in kindness and as I have written so often lately I have but little to write this time this makes the eighth one I have sent you since getting one from you but a man belonging to one of the companies in the Regiment was caught robbing our mail last night and destroying the letters and likenesses and taking out the money so he may have taken and destroyed the letters that I have sent to you so I dont blame you so much, I wish you would send me some postage stamp and five dollars just as soon as you can so I

Courtesy of Ellen Alden.

My Dear wife

For god sakes do end my misery, do write and let me know the reason you have so long delayed to write me, have I in any way, either by word, deed or action, given you cause to neglect me in this manner, if I have for God sake let me know how, and in what way, and when, that I may try and prove to you that I am innocent of any such intention, since leaving house I have tried to das as near right as I know how and to behave myself in such a manner that my wife or family need have any occasion to blush with shame or anger for the conduct of myself, have I written anything to you to make you angry or feel bad, if I have I have done it not with the intention of causing any gad feelings but only wrote what I have warn to warn you to be on your guard against all scandalous reports, for almost every one in the

army are hearing something bad about home, but you know me well enough to know that whatever I may hear I would not believe or pay any attention to, but only wish you to be on the sharp lookout that any of your bad neighbors may have no occasion to speak ill of you, Gen Grant, reviewed our corps yesterday and this morning we have orders that all letters must stop for thirty days and I think it to bad for you to keep me so long out of a letter for I am in low spirits to go into battle without hearing from you and the children for so long but if I had a letter every week as I should have had I should not feel so bad going into battle which we all expect to do before many days pass, as this may be the last letter you may ever get from me I hope Dear Ellen that you will try to take good care of yourself and the children and may the good god watch over you and them and if I [am] doomed to fall on the field of battle and we destined to never meet again on earth may we be so prepared that we may meet in heaven, and after I am gone you may sometime think of me and feel that you have done wrong in keeping me in so much trouble and anxiety of mind as you have for the last month, but Dear Ellen I hope the good God may forgive you as I do, as long as I can't hear anything from home and I write so often and as I do I know I know you hear often form me and you know what I want you need not do anything about the cellar except put up a post and nail up some plank which will do till I get home if I have the luck to do I sent my likeness and yours and the childrens except yours and the babies which I meant to keep I sent them in fear anything might happen to me but as I have heard nothing from you since I sent them I fear they are all lost and if you have not got them go to Col Parsons and try and find out about the money but if you had written to me before I might have looked out for it before I went into battle but it is to late for me to do anything and you must be on the lookout for your self till you hear from me again, if I live to see a year from the 3rd of next September I expect to be home with the regiment their time being out at that time and one of my tent mates wrote to Gov Andrew and made answer that the recruits time would end with the regiment, I wrote for some money and some stamps but I have got neither so you can keep them till you hear form me again for if you send them now they will get lost I sent you all the money I got but eighty cents and borrowed twenty cents and with the dollar I got the picture taken so I am left without a cent to buy tobacco with. Dear Ellen, this may be the last good bye you may ever hear form me but trust in God and all may yet be well, receive my love and this in kindness

*From you husband Florence Burke
Farewell Dear Ellen perhaps forever but hope not
A man was caught trying to desert by one of my tent mates last Friday while
was on picket*

And one excerpt from his final letter after that:

June 16th 1864

“Dearest Ellen, all I want you to do is keep good courage and mind the children and keep them in school. That is the wish of an absent father to his family. My love to you and the children. Good night.”

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