

## Echo St. Patrick's Day

# And faithfully again from Ellen Alden

By Ellen B. Alden

You never know what you'll find in your attic

A little over four years ago I discovered an old leather box filled with nineteenth Civil War letters and tin-type photos.

The box was left behind by my parents when they moved out of New England, along with other cardboard boxes filled with Life magazines and family photo albums.

I was rummaging through the attic, looking for an album when I came across a tiny, dusty, leather box and its odd shape intrigued me.

I carried the box downstairs and into better lighting.

Upon opening it I was amazed to see a stack of neatly written letters as well as tin photos of a man wearing a Union Army Uniform.

I immediately reached for the phone to call my parents and inquire about the box and its contents.

What I learned from my father was that these letters were written from his great grandfather Florence Burke to his wife and children back home in West Springfield, Massachusetts.

Amazing.

The handsome man in the tin photo is my Irish ancestor!

My father explained that Florence Burke was an Irish immigrant from County Cork.

He fled the potato famine at 19 years old, immigrated to America and lived as a farmer in West Springfield.

He married his Irish love Ellen (coincidentally my name too) and had three children (so do I) before joining the Union Army as a "substitute" for a wealthy man in exchange for money to buy his own land.

That's really all my father knew of his Irish ancestors.

Well, that information was enough to pique my interest.

I delved into the letters and it felt like I'd climbed into a time machine and travelled back to 1864 on the Virginia battlefields.

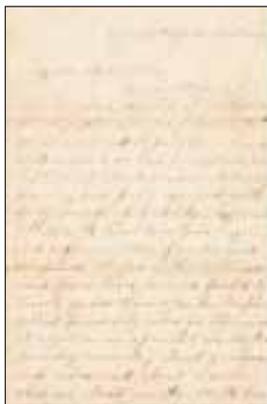
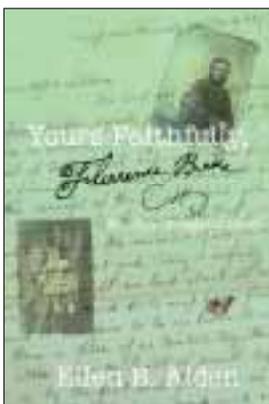
My great, great grandfather's words were eloquent, emotional and compelling. Here are excerpts from his letters: "March 4th 1864 Camp of the 37th Regiment. On my arrival to camp I found a letter from you containing your well-known features and that of the children.

"Mingled tears of joy and sadness welled up in 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 themselves, that they might speak to cheer my drooping spirits. But, thanks be to God the sight of them, though mute, shall ever be a beacon to urge me on to duty.

"April 25th 1864 Camp of the 37th Regiment. General Grant reviewed our corps yesterday and this morning we have orders that all letters must stop for thirty



Ellen Alden with John O'Sullivan.



days... As this may be the last letter you ever get from me I hope, Dear Ellen, that you will try and take good care of yourself and the children and may the good God watch over you and them. If I am doomed to fall on the field of battle and we are destined to never meet again on earth, may be prepared to meet in Heaven."

The fateful discovery of these letters changed the course of my life.

I was a part-time elementary teacher and a very busy mother raising three children, but I became obsessed with the letters and wanted to learn more about the Burke family.

I wanted to know why a 35-year-old Irish immigrant would join the Union Army in 1864, when he had a loving wife and three children at home. His letters give some clues, but I knew in order to find out answers I would have to retrace his roots, and that meant travelling back to Ireland.

In June of 2013 my family and I travelled to County Cork in search of family records and addition information regarding my Irish ancestors.

I wish I could say that the trip was fruitful and that I discovered all the answers to my questions, but I did not.

Instead, we made a stop in a quaint village named Ballinassig

One of the letters.

and there, by chance, I met a local historian who took the time to talk with me and help me with my research.

He discussed the Great Hunger, and its effects on his village, and the disease and starvation that made so many emigrate.

He also explained the lack of response from the British government.

John L. O'Sullivan would be my "Irish editor" when the actual writing process finally began, and he was also kind enough to write the foreword to my book.

After the Ireland trip, I researched extensively in America and had much better luck.

Through Ancestry.com, library research, military records, town hall records and immigration records I began to piece Florence and Ellen's life history together.

I learned that Florence Burke was a farmer in Ireland and that he and his love Ellen emigrated separately from famine-stricken Ireland between 1848 and 1850.

They reunited in West Springfield, married, and had three children, but remained very poor.

In January of 1864 Florence Burke made the desperate decision to enlist in the Union Army, making a trade for land in ex-



The trove of letters.

change for his service.

He was trying to raise his family out of poverty.

He served with the 37th Regiment in Virginia from January to June of 1864. Did Florence Burke's gamble pay off? Did he survive the war? You'll have to read the book to find out.

After one year of research, I started the writing process.

I initially believed I would write a non-fiction account, timeline and brief history of my great, great grandparents.

But as I started to relay the events onto paper, I envisioned the characters and time periods and I suddenly saw my ancestors' story coming to life.

I knew then and there that historical fiction was going to be the right genre for me.

Not thinking that anyone would ever read my book besides my 96-year-old grandmother, my parents and my children, I wrote with utter abandon.

I chose the first person perspective because that is the way the story naturally unfolded for me.

I also wanted the reader to know what it was like for the wife of a soldier to wait and only hear from her husband through sporadic letters. I used all of Florence Burke's Civil War letters in my novel, many of them verbatim.

I only added or changed the words if they were illegible or torn, or if I needed to add emotion or description to make the chapters flow.

After a year of writing countless drafts I hired an editor thinking she could put the final touches to my manuscript.

What I didn't foresee was that she would make major revisions and edits and that it would take an additional year of rewrites.

In the end, my editor helped me create a better fiction story so I am grateful for the long journey.

In May of 2016 my book, "Yours Faithfully, Florence Burke," was published and by June I was invited to present my book at the Irish Cultural Centre in New Eng-

land at their Boston Irishfest.

From that initial presentation, I have been amazed at all the other opportunities this book has provided for me.

"Yours Faithfully, Florence Burke" has been embraced by the Irish in New England.

I've shared the letters and my Irish immigrant story with branches of the Boston Public Library, with the Great Hunger Museum at Quinnipiac University, with Irish organizations, historical societies and book clubs.

I've been invited to the largest Irish fest in the world in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

It is there that I had my very first National Public Radio interview.

I never knew that interviews or public speaking would be a big part of my future, but I am enjoying the book promotional work.

I have a unique and compelling multimedia presentation, as well as the original Civil War letters and photos, and for special events I have an acapella singer performing the Irish song, "Isle of Hope, Isle of Tears" that has brought audiences to tears.

I am grateful to share my great, great grandparent's extraordinary life story and to honor their lives. Yours Faithfully Florence Burke is really a story of one immigrant family, among millions, trying to survive in their adoptive country at a time when the nation is divided.

**Ellen B. Alden is a first time writer who has previously worked as an elementary school teacher and wine consultant. Ellen has travelled extensively in Europe, and lived two years in England with her family. She resides in Andover, MA with her husband and three children. More at [www.ellenalden.com](http://www.ellenalden.com). Her book can be found in six bookstores in Eastern Massachusetts, or online at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com), [Barnesandnoble.com](http://Barnesandnoble.com), [apple iBooks](http://appleiBooks.com) and [Goodreads](http://Goodreads.com). More at [www.ellenalden.com](http://www.ellenalden.com).**