

# THE CONAN AND MCGRAW FAMILIES

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In October of 2010, I was reading a Wikipedia article on Tipperary Hill in Syracuse, NY. The article included a reference to the fact that a large number of persons who had settled in Pompey, NY had come from the Upperchurch area of Co. Tipperary in Ireland. That statement referenced a St. Patrick's Day article in the Syracuse paper from 1977. I looked up the paper and it was a long article with many quotes, including the Upperchurch reference, by a Dr. Robert Conan who was a Chemistry professor at LeMoyne College in Syracuse. I wasn't aware that anyone else had discovered the large concentration of former Upperchurch residents that had settled in the southern part of Onondaga County, at least not that early.

I tried to find Robert Conan and discovered that he had died in Syracuse on November 8, 2002. He was survived by a brother, Paul Conan of Camillus and some nephews and a niece. My next thought was about what happened to all his genealogy research papers? I tried the Onondaga County Historical Society and the Syracuse University Archives and they didn't have any of Robert Conan's papers. The Onondaga Public Library and the LeMoyne College library never returned my phone calls.

The trail was dead, literally - so I started looking for his ancestors to determine Robert Conan's connection with Upperchurch. He had mentioned Pompey so I looked there first. How would someone know that Upperchurch even existed, I asked myself, unless their ancestors had come from that area of Ireland? It turned out that there were more than enough Conan families, under several spellings, in the Pompey church records. I was able to assemble several families from the baptismal records, with parents of similar ages. It appeared that several siblings might have come over to America together.

Once I had a base of Conans I started following them in the census records and then through the newspapers. There was a Conan that went into real estate and then there was Robert at LeMoyne College. With Robert deceased I followed his brother Paul who was still alive and living in Camillus, on the west side of Syracuse. I found Paul Conan's address and phone number and then the method of contacting him had to be worked out. A phone call out of the blue, from a stranger, asking questions about family details tends to make older people nervous. After looking at a map of Camillus I realized that Doug and Lucy Currie lived about a block and a half away from Paul Conan. In an e-mail I related the story to Doug and explained how I thought that an in-person visit from a neighbor of about the same age might yield better results than a cold call from a guy in Texas. Fortunately, I caught Doug before he and Lucy left for Florida and he was able to walk over and pay a visit to Paul Conan.

This turned out to be the right Paul Conan, he was indeed the brother of the late chemistry professor. Paul told Doug that all of Robert's genealogy papers were still in existence. They were in the possession of Paul's son, Paul, Jr., who was living in Walden, NY, 130 miles east of Binghamton and 9 miles west of the city of Newburgh. Doug was able to get Paul, Jr.'s e-mail address and phone number.

On November 1st (2010) I placed a phone call to the younger Paul Conan and he confirmed that he was the caretaker of the mountain of paper that his uncle, Robert Conan, had left behind. It was so extensive (hundreds of notebooks) that he could only keep about a third of it at his house. The rest of the notebooks had to be stored in two different locations. Paul explained that his uncle was a bachelor and during his summers off from teaching he was in the habit of visiting various parishes in Ireland where he transcribed the church records from the local parishes. This was back in the late '60s and early '70s, when apparently they allowed such access to those fragile old parish register books. That was the good news. The bad news was that, outside of putting it all in notebooks, Robert Conan had never bothered writing up any of his research.

Within a few days after my call, Paul had done a quick assessment and was able to give me an over view of some of the parishes that his uncle had visited and the number of records that he had transcribed. Paul's personal research interest at that time was his mother's line and so he wasn't going to be able to dig into his uncle's record for a while.

Paul and I hadn't communicated since the fall of 2010, until last week. I received an e-mail that seemed to be from a Paul Conan and some of the names in the addressee list looked familiar. They were names from around Mattydale and Syracuse. I checked the part of the sender's e-mail address after the "@" sign and the first page of Google hits were all in a Middle Eastern character set. The e-mail wasn't from the real Paul Conan. I took a screen shot of the e-mail and sent a copy to Paul and asked if the e-mail addresses looked like they had come from his address book.

Paul replied that it looked like he had been hacked. We quickly got back to genealogy and he sent me some copies of pictures from one of his Uncle Robert's trips to Ireland in the '60s and '70s. These were pictures of the old Conan homestead and the surrounding area in the townland of Foilagoule, a few kilometers south of our Ryans in Gleann. Paul explained that he had gone to Ireland with his uncle in 1998 but they couldn't find the old homestead at that time. I thought that today, in 2016, there should be more than enough information around to be able to find the old Conan homestead with all the records, maps and satellite imagery available today. Since the Conan family was still in Ireland in the early 1850s they made it into the Griffith's Valuation and I was able to find a Jeremiah Coonan as an occupant in Foilagoule. The field patterns have changed very little over the more than 160 years since that valuation was published. As a result it was possible match up the valuation maps with the modern satellite images and I believe I was able to find the location of the homestead. However, it wasn't

possible to know for certain if any of the original buildings were still standing. If Paul ever goes back to Ireland again he'll at least be able to find the farm land.

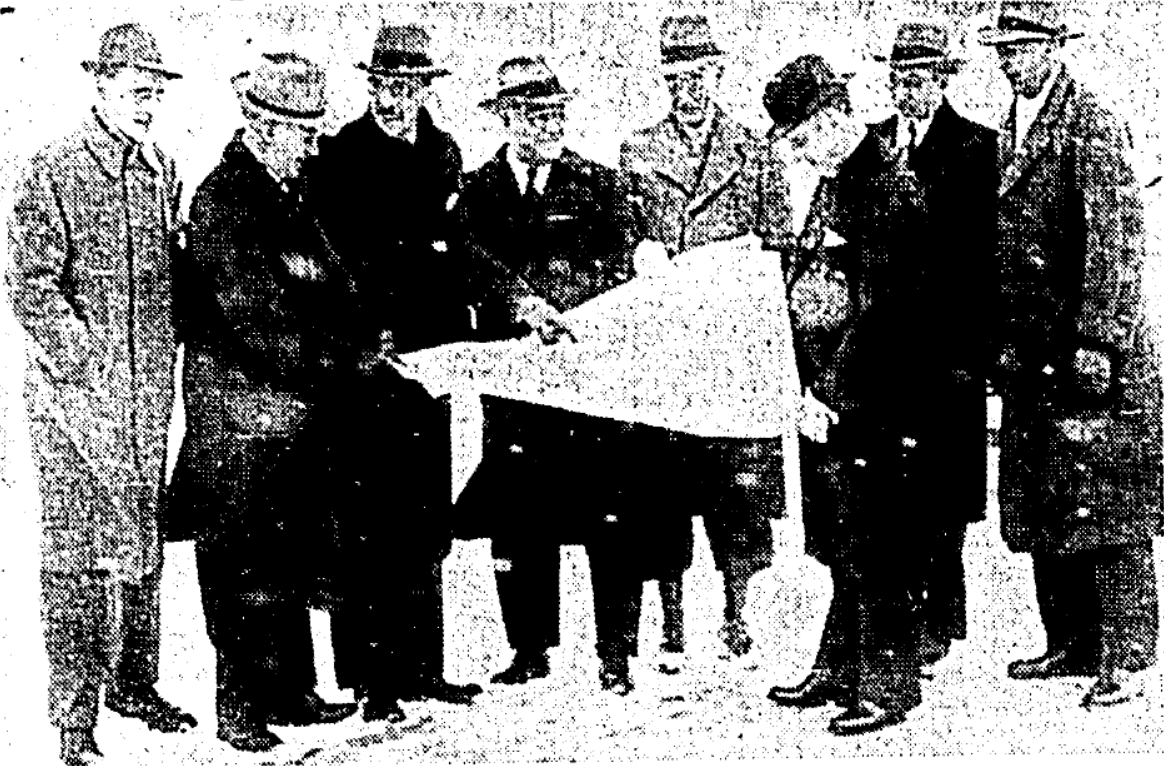


Robert Conan, Sr. in front of the Conan family homestead, Foilagoule, Moyaliff parish, Co. Tipperary, late '60s or early '70s. Photo from Paul Conan, Jr.

I reminded Paul that there was another connection between our two families when it came to homesteads. During WWII civilian construction was banned. However, in 1942 it was decided that more housing would be needed in Mattydale to support the Mattydale Army Air Base that was to be constructed that year. Under the National Home Defense Act the Pomeroy Real Estate Company put together a plan to build a number of houses on the Kirsch Tract. The model home for the development was built at 320 Kirsch Drive. I informed Paul that my parents had bought that house in September 1949 and lived there until 1976. That was our homestead. There is even a picture of the ground breaking ceremony at the Kirsch Drive site from 1942, with Robert Conan, Sr. in the group. This was Paul Conan, Jr.'s grandfather and the same person shown in the picture above.

[http://mcgrathsearch.com/mattydale\\_files/national\\_defense\\_home\\_program.htm](http://mcgrathsearch.com/mattydale_files/national_defense_home_program.htm)

## *Inspect Mattydale Housing Site*



**SITE FOR DEFENSE HOMES** in Mattydale section is inspected by State Housing leaders and interested Syracuseans. Left to right are: John Cole, architect; Samuel N. McCain, treasurer and Donald T. Pomeroy, president, Pomeroy Organization, Inc.; Roy S. Smith, director, FIIA Albany office; Fred L. Schopfer, of Schopfer Brothers, Inc., builders; Thomas G. Grace of New York City, State FIIA director; Robert J. Conan, Pomeroy vice president, and Clarence L. Schopfer, Schopfer Brothers.

Robert Conan, Sr., in February, 1942, at the future location of our 320 Kirsch Drive homestead.  
The Syracuse Herald American, Syracuse, NY, Sunday, February 22, 1942.

Although they are all mixed in with his uncle Robert's other papers, Paul said that they still had some of the actual blueprints from some of those early projects. I asked him to keep an eye out for houses from the 300 block of Kirsch Drive.

Paul's family would like to donate his uncle's papers and books to a library or some kind of organization that could take care of them. I told him about trying to give away Noël's books and how no one but Good Will would take them. In passing I mentioned the trouble trying to find a home for Dad's collection of baseball books and that opened another door.

Paul wrote back:

"You mention an old collection of baseball books. Was your father interested in early baseball history? On my mother's side I have an interesting relative. His name is James

H. O'Rourke and he is in the Baseball Hall of Fame. He got the first ever base hit in National League history on April 22nd 1876. He also was the oldest player to get a base hit in National League history on September 22nd 1904 at the age of 54. Also, he graduated from Yale Law School in 1887 and had his team, the New York Giants (now the San Francisco Giants), pay for it. He was a very interesting character.”



James Henry O'Rourke, nicknamed "Orator Jim"  
(September 1, 1850 – January 8, 1919)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim\\_O%27Rourke\\_\(baseball\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_O%27Rourke_(baseball))

So naturally I had to write back and tell him about John J. McGraw who was his gg-grandfather's boss at the time he set those last records. To which he replied:

“Your McGraw relative coached my great-great grandfather on the day he made history on 9-22-1904. That's an amazing coincidence. With the Giants win that day they clinched the NL pennant. I have several photos (not original) of that 1904 team with Manager McGraw. O'Rourke only played that one game in 1904, and had 1 hit in 4 at bats. On that day he also became the first player in Major League history to play baseball in 4 separate decades - 70s, 80s, 90s, and 00s. My family - with about 50 O'Rourke descendants - went to Cooperstown in 2013 for O'Rourke's "official" HOF induction. He was inducted in 1945 but because of WW2 the HOF did not have an actual ceremony that year.”

<http://baseballhall.org/hof/orourke-jim>

You never know when another family connection might turn up. What had started as a simple curiosity about a Wikipedia statement concerning Upperchurch folks settling in Pompey, NY turned up another Upperchurch family – the Conan family. Then, six years later, it was surprising that a bogus e-mail led to the discovery of several other connections between the Conan and McGraw families.