INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on a specific Irish immigrant ancestor of mine, John Stack. In telling his particular story, it at the same time broadly outlines the story of nineteenth century European émigrés from many countries. Much, if not most, of nineteenth century immigration to the United States was driven by one or more factors: political disenfranchisement, religious oppression, highly stratified class systems that limited upward mobility, lack of opportunity to buy and own land, and few if any educational opportunities were common to most European countries at that time. Whether immigrants were Jews escaping the Russian pogroms or Italians seeking more economic opportunity, pacifist religious sects escaping Prussian militarism or Irish fleeing political and religious oppression, grinding poverty and want, the immigrants’ stories share many similarities. This story of my ancestor is therefore simultaneously both a story specific to my family in its particulars and a history shared widely among the descendants of nineteenth century immigrants to America regardless of country of origin.
“Lives of great men all remind us
we can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
footprints on the sands of time;
Footprints, that perhaps another
Sailing o’er life’s solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.”  
Longfellow

John Stack was born 24 June 1824 and raised in County Kerry, Province of Munster, Ireland. John’s history and actions are interwoven with the land and history of Ireland as well as the Stack family history. This paper details events that formed him, his family and his people. As the Irish transformed and were transformed by the histories of two nations, so was John Stack, who made a life for himself in America, but whose story begins in Ireland.

Ireland, or Eire in the Irish language, is washed by abundant rain, revealing a landscape teeming with verdant vegetation. Ireland is affectionately referred to as the Emerald Isle, a reference to its rain-caused greenery. It’s the second largest of the group of islands known collectively as the British Isles. Ireland has an area of 32,600 square miles of which 27,100 now form the Republic of Ireland and 5,500 the Province of Northern Ireland. Ireland possesses a coastline of almost 2,000 miles. The relative populations are 3.5 million and 1.6 million respectively.

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In order to understand the Irish of the 19th century and their unique blend of courage, tenacity and loyalty, it is necessary to understand the Penal Laws. Protestant William of Orange was invited to ascend the English throne in 1688; his ascension led to Irish support of the Catholic Stuarts’ heir, James II. The Irish took up arms behind James II to defeat William of Orange. James II raised his standard in Ireland at the head of an Irish Catholic army, but was defeated on Irish soil, at the battle of the Boyne in 1690.

English vengeance followed. England intended to render the Irish impotent thereafter and eliminate the possibility of further uprisings. To that end, Parliament passed the Penal Laws. 4 The Penal Laws barred Catholics from the army and navy, the law, commerce, and from every civic activity. No Catholic could vote, hold any office or purchase land. Catholic estates were dismembered by an enactment directing that, at the death of a Catholic land owner, his estate was to be divided among all his sons, unless the eldest became a Protestant, then he could inherit the whole. Catholics could neither attend nor keep schools, nor send their children abroad to be educated. Banned from formal education, the Irish were forced to keep their knowledge alive through story telling. As one author said: “there was a vigorous oral history about the hearth.” 5

“To worship according to his faith, the Catholic must attend illegal meetings, to protect his priest, he must be secret, cunning, and a concealer of the truth. These were dangerous lessons for any

4 Mike Cronin, A History of Ireland (New York: Pelgrave, 2001), 81.

5 Brian de Breffny, The Land of Ireland (New York: Abradale Press, 1979), 143.
government to compel its subjects to learn, and a dangerous habit of mind for any nation to acquire.”  

“The material damage suffered through the Penal Laws was great; ruin was widespread, old families disappeared and old estates were broken up; but the most disastrous effects were moral. The Penal Laws brought lawlessness, dissimulation and revenge in their train, and the Irish character, above all the character of the peasantry, became degraded and debased.”

**Nineteenth Century Political Climate**

John Stack was born in Ireland at a time of great political activity. Daniel O’Connell had formed the Catholic Association in 1823 to use constitutional means to secure Catholic emancipation. O’Connell’s successes were a result of involving rural tenants in the association. The poor rural tenants were Catholic and identified with the Catholic cause. When a parliamentary seat became vacant in 1828 in County Clare, he ran for it even though he knew he was legally barred from taking the seat if elected. Riding an excessive voter turnout, driven in large part by the rural tenant members of the association, O’Connell won. Fearing Civil War if O’Connell wasn’t allowed to take his newly won seat gained with such a considerable voter turn out, the Duke of Wellington, who was Prime Minister at the time, grudgingly pushed through the Catholic Relief Act of 1829, which granted Catholic Emancipation by removing the ban on Catholics in Parliament. It allowed O’Connell to take his

7 Woodham-Smith, 27.
seat in the Westminster parliament. O’Connell has subsequently been hailed in Ireland as “The Liberator.”

The Tithe Wars, based on the momentum established by O’Connell’s election and passage of the Catholic Relief Act, followed. Tithes were a legal requirement that the Irish people paid to support the Church of England, a religion the English were trying to force them to adopt. The paying of tithes was one the Catholics longstanding grievances. Leinster, a province in Eastern Ireland, became the first area to initiate a campaign against the paying of tithes in the 1830’s and it rapidly spread throughout Ireland. Secret societies were active in attacking tithe collectors. Irish tenants, who earlier were easily victimized, gradually became more confident and refused to pay tithes.

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9 Carmel McCaffrey In Search of Ireland’s Heroes (Chicago: Ivan R. De, 2006), 154.
“All this wretchedness and misery could, almost without exception, be traced to a single source - the system under which land had come to be occupied and owned in Ireland, a system produced by centuries of successive conquests, rebellions, confiscations and punitive legislation.” 10

The British government used police and the army to put into effect the paying of tithes, but by the late 1830s it was costing the government too much money. As one English official said, “it is costing a shilling to collect tuppence.” 11 The amount of the tithe was reduced which temporarily eased the tension.

O’Connell next threw his support behind an attempt to repeal the Act of Union, declaring 1843 to be “Repeal Year”. The Act of Union took effect in 1801, solely for the purpose of integrating the economies of Ireland and England. Joining the two countries’ economies led to hopes that Ireland might gain some capital needed for development and internal improvements. However, the primary result of the Union was not to assist and improve Ireland, but to bring Ireland more completely into subjugation and servitude. In a speech in May 1843 Daniel O’Connell told the crowd “My first object is to get Ireland for the Irish”. The repeal movement had enormous popular support, drawing large crowds. “In August 1843 more than a quarter of a million people gathered at Tara, the ancient “capital” of a once-free Ireland, and listened to speeches on Irish self-government. Wearing green, now the symbolic color of nationalism, the crowd cheered on the idea presented of an Ireland free of the English yoke”. 12 It would take over three quarters of a century more for this to became a reality.

10 Woodham-Smith, 20.
12 McCaffrey, 158.
Stack Family History

The Stack Family were Anglo-Normans and have been in north Kerry since at least 1286. County Kerry, on the southwestern coast of Ireland, is located in the historical province of Munster. It neighbors counties Limerick and Cork. Towns and villages in County Kerry include Ballybunnion, Cahirciveen, Castleisland, Dingle, Kenmare, Killarney, Listowel and Tralee. The population of Kerry was about 294,000 in 1841 but declined to about 166,000 by

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13 de Breffny, 137.
1901. The name Kerry originates from the Irish Ciarraí or ciar-raighe, meaning ‘the people of Ciar’.  

Surrounded by sea and mountains, Kerry is famous for its breathtaking landscape as well as its wealth of wildlife. It boasts the highest mountain in Ireland, Carrauntoohil, a national park, beautiful beaches and exceptionally scenic hill-walking routes.  


The Stack family were allies of the Fitzmaurices, lords of Kerry, settling in the Kilflynn area about 1320. Later they built a residence at Crotta and their influence in the area is indicated by the fact that the nearby settlement, now the village of Kilflynn, was known for a long time as Stackstown. Their association with the area is further attested to by the Stack mountains, situated between Tralee and Abbeyfeale, and by the fact that the district about Crotta was long known as Pubble (Pobal) Stack or Stack’s country.16

Some of the early Stack’s were clerics attached to the diocese of Ardfert. William Stack was parish priest of Ventry, in west Kerry, in 1398; another William Stack, who had been chancellor in 1403, was archdeacon of Ardfert in 1408; Maurice Stack was bishop of Ardfert in 1449, John Stack, who had formerly been dean of the diocese, succeeded his namesake as bishop in 1458. Upon the death of Bishop Stack, Philip Stack, a secular priest, was declared Successor by Pope Innocent the 8th, on 27 Oct, 1488. He served almost seven years and died in 1495. Gerald Stack was appointed parish priest of Listowel in 1493.17

In 1922 when Ireland finally achieved independence, another Stack was prominent in that struggle. Austin Stack was a Kerryman and commandant of the Kerry brigade of the Irish Volunteers. For more information about Austin Stack, read “Austin Stack: Portrait of a Separatist” by J. Anthony Gaughan.


17 Gaughan, 7.
The history of Ireland is not a happy one. Famine, population loss, civil war, murder, colonization and terrorism all feature heavily when you talk about the history of Ireland. This is the Ireland that drove my great-great-grandfather John Stack, to emigrate to America in, or about, the early 1840s. Keeping in mind he was leaving all that he had ever known to migrate to America, a country about which he, perhaps being denied an education, must necessarily have known almost nothing.

John’s parents were James Stack and Mary Murphy. His future wife, Winnifred’s parents were Martin O’Connor and Margaret Muldowney. I have uncovered nothing on them other than their names and those names were written down on a piece of paper by Annie (Stack) Mahoney, fourth child of John and Winnie (O’Connor) Stack. I also have the O’Connor parentage verified on Allise O’Connor Crimmins’ death certificate. 18 When and where John’s and Winnie’s parents were born and died remain a mystery, other than they were from Ireland. Mary Kay Stack Artz did tell me that “the O’Connor’s girls mother had died and their father killed. The girls were packed off to America, in approximately 1852-53, where they had brothers in Peoria”. 19 Those three girls were Winnifred, Hannorah and Allise O’Connor.

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19 Great-granddaughter of John Stack and Winnifred O’Connor.
Why Did John Leave Ireland?

John Stack’s decision to migrate to America was likely driven by a number of reasons. The fact that he wasn’t a first-born son meant that he couldn’t inherit any land from his father, a right reserved for the first-born son. Likely, contributing factors were the English political and religious oppression, as well as the terrible famine that resulted from the potato blight in the mid 19th century.

No other European disease has been written about more than the “Famine” or “Great Famine” except for the Black Death of the 1350’s. The Famine of the 1840’s is one of the most significant watersheds in Irish history. Ireland, already no stranger to tragedy and loss, reeled before the devastation and desolation that occurred during the Famine years. The Famine changed forever the way of life in Ireland and its shadow hung over future generations.

Potato Blight and Famine

Throughout Ireland in 1846 crops flourished and appeared healthy. Fields and home gardens where the potato seed had been sown were richly supplied with dark green leaves and purple blossoms, proof of a thriving and abundant potato crop. The familiar leafy stalks, shooting up from the edible underground tubers looked robust and sturdy in even the most wretched patches of land sown by squatters.20

In the prior year, 1845, a near calamity had been averted when a disease attacked the potato crop, but killed only half the crop. The Irish people suffered, being used to deprivation, scarcity and want, made do with what they could salvage.\(^{21}\) The weather variations were extreme the summer of 1846.

“Mild, dry mornings were followed by heavy afternoon rains, thunder and lightening. The temperature in some areas dropped to thirty degrees in the middle of an afternoon, and clouds tumbled down the mountainsides like soft silent avalanches of snow, their whitish vapors twisting and rolling in flurries into the valleys, where they seemed to smother all that was growing. Not a bird was to be seen or heard during these visitations, and this heightened the peculiar silence, the bleak depressing twilights, that came with them. The birds did not return until the wind lifted and cleared these pockets of fog from the ground, and then there remained on that potato stalks a light frost like a powdering of snow.” \(^{22}\)

The disease appeared first in County Cork; by the end of July it reappeared in other areas, accompanied by the confirming stench. It was a sulfurous, sewer-like smell carried by the wind from the rotting plants in the first struck places.\(^{23}\) The stalks themselves were discolored with what looked like spreading sores, cankers where the tissue of the plant had already died.

All around these dead spots the stalks appeared to be still living, which gave the farmers a desperate hope that they could stem the spread of the disease by cutting it away. They called their family members, wives, sons and daughters, to come, look, and help. In one last effort, they ripped up the stalks to prevent the “gangrene” from traveling down the stem into the


\(^{22}\) Gallagher, 4.

\(^{23}\) Gallagher, 4.
potatoes underground. Unknown at the time, the fungus, Phytophthora infestans, came directly from the soil and not from the stem of the potato. The farmers that dug up their potatoes immediately and laid them out to dry were luckier than those who cut away the stems and left the potatoes in the ground; those farmers found only a blackened and slimy mess that broke into mush under the slightest pressure when they dug their hands into the ground to check their crop. “Keeners at a wake could not have sent up more varieties of anguish and despair than did these Irish families at the sight of their entire year’s food supply being destroyed.”  

Illustrated London News

It is known now that there was plenty of food during the Famine, but it was all taken - every bit of corn, cattle, grains and other agricultural crops to feed England under a severe sharecropping system which left Irishmen exiled, homeless and dispossessed in their own land, evicted from their own farms. Privation forced the Irish to abandon their homes in search of a new life beyond the hated British Empire, perhaps leaving with a traditional Irish traveler’s blessing:

24 Gallagher, 6.
May the road rise to meet you,
May the wind be always at your back,
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
And rains fall soft upon your fields,
And until we meet again,
May God Hold you in the hollow of His hand.\textsuperscript{25}

\textit{Illustrated London News}

\textit{Escape and Farewell}

Margaret (Hanifin) Robbins, daughter of Winifred Stack and John Hanifin, says “stories my mother used to tell us children concerned the great sadness my grandfather Stack experienced as he left his family and Ireland when he was just 17 years old. One of his brothers, Matthew, was a fine poet in Ireland and considered the poet laureate of his village”.

\textsuperscript{25} Traditional Irish Blessing.
An Irishman’s love of his homeland and of the Irish way of life, despite the hardships imposed by the Union with Britain in 1800, had always, until the famine, limited emigration. Out of the Famine’s devastation and English oppression, John Stack left his decimated family and his dead dreams for a life in Ireland behind, and departed for America. The hardships endured by John Stack, both in his native Ireland and after his arrival in America are unimaginable to his living descendants.

Illustrated London News

I especially think of his mother, Mary, having to say goodbye to her son John, knowing she would never see him again. The finality of his leaving, coupled with the thought of never looking into his eyes or caressing her son again must have produced a pain too great for her to bear.
Such pain led to the practice of the “American wake”, in which families mourned the loss of their sons or daughters who were leaving forever, a heart rending affair for all involved. 26 A wake was held because a child’s departure was a kind of death in the sense the loved one was unlikely to ever be seen again. This was especially true during the age of sail when a voyage across the Atlantic lasted two to three months and the prospect of a return voyage was beyond imagining. Many sought to avoid the wake by running away. I often think of my great-great-grandfather calling on friends and family throughout the parish and beyond, informing them of his intentions. In every cottage he visited there might be a minor tempest of regrets, then blessings and good wishes for his safe voyage.

Although the famine itself probably resulted in about one million deaths, the resultant emigration caused the population to drop by a further three million. These emigrants largely ended up in North America. Between 1845 and 1855, 1.5 million Irish left for good. In 1845, emigration was at the pre-famine rate of 50,000 per year. In 1846, 100,000 left. Emigration peaked in 1847, when 250,000 left. Over the next five years it averaged 200,000 per year, before the numbers fell off. 27

Queen Victoria’s ascension was in 1837, yet she didn’t visit Ireland until 1849, 28 feeling it was the perfect time to show compassion for her Irish subjects suffering the effects of the famine. She disembarked at the port town of Cobh, (pronounced cove) located at the entrance to Cork

27 Dolan, 74.
28 Bartoletti, 162.
harbor, and renamed it Queenstown\textsuperscript{29} to honor the site where she first touched Irish soil. The town changed its name back to Cobh after Irish independence in 1922. Would the Stack family have been among the throngs lining the harbor when the royal yacht appeared? It seems highly unlikely to me.

John Stack’s obituary says the origins of the Peoria-Tazewell-McLean Stack’s are in County Kerry, Ireland, probably in or near the parish of Listowel. It also stated that he emigrated to the United States in 1841.\textsuperscript{30} If his obituary is correct, then he was only 17 years old and appears to be the first family member to leave County Kerry.

Unlike migrations from other European countries, most Irish emigrants did not travel in a family group, but rather came alone or with one other person. The young men and women who left Ireland were, for the most part, from a rural economy for which there was no longer any future. Women made up 40 percent of these emigrants. By the 1840s, as much as 60 percent of those who emigrated were unskilled laborers.

\textit{Migration Route}

How did John Stack get to America? Since most of the shipping lanes in the Irish Sea led to Liverpool or Wales, the first leg of the emigrant’s journey was typically from a port in Ireland to Liverpool. This had become the established route, cheap and routine. Winnie (O’Connor) Stack’s brother, John O’Connor and his wife Margaret Hayes, went to Wales awaiting their

\textsuperscript{29} Bartoletti, 163.

passage to America. Margaret (Hayes) O’Connor must have been pregnant when the young couple left Ireland, as their first son Martin, (named for John O’Connor’s father) was born in Wales. Martin was 11 weeks old when he and his family arrived in New York on 19 April 1851 on the ship “Adelaïde”.31

The crossing from Ireland to Liverpool took about a day. After arriving in Liverpool, the emigrant had to wait around for a ship bound for America. This could mean days of waiting in rundown flophouses. Emigrants either purchased their own tickets or had them prepaid by friends or family members already in America. In many cases, getting passage on a ship seems to have been a matter of waiting for an opportunity rather than booking tickets in advance.

Marie Stack Pankey told me that her father, Martin Andrew Stack, last born son of John Stack and Winnie O’Connor Stack, always spoke of “John having had borrowed forty dollars from his father when he left Ireland and took great pleasure in the re-payment of that loan”.

People on their way to ports where outgoing ships lay at anchor were reluctant to linger with relatives and friends, knowing that any expression of affection or loss would only weaken their resolve to leave before it was too late. Hope was before them, behind them the misery and loved ones they were leaving.32

31 Immigration Passenger List 1851, 19 April 1851, Port of New York arrival.
**Coffin Ships**

When the time came, they boarded a ship destined for Canada or America. “A sizable number of Irish, as many as 60 percent of all Irish emigrants, chose to sail to Canada. The primary reason was cheaper fares.”

The emigrants usually arrived at the departure docks cold, poor, half-starved and often sick. Here they found board in lodging-houses which were often little more than filthy overcrowded slums. The lodging houses at Liverpool dock in the 1840’s were particularly notorious. Hundreds of immigrants would be crammed into dens with men, women and children bedded down together often on a cold floor without blankets. Emigrants could be robbed, cheated and ran the risk of contracting a variety of contagious diseases. They were subject to racketeers and agents for the shipping companies. Among the most common scams was the selling of dollars at exorbitant exchange rates, selling inferior quality clothes and overcharging for boarding. A more sophisticated fraud was to sell American land to emigrants, land which was worthless or which the seller did not even own. It was also known for emigrants to be offered hiding places on ships such as in boxes for a small fee.

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33 Dolan, 37.

If the emigrant was sailing straight to America, then New York was the harbor of choice. Sailing to America took about six weeks. Most of the Irish emigrants went steerage. Their accommodations were primitive and poorly ventilated, amid crowded conditions that routinely housed four people in a space only six by six feet and five or six feet high. These spaces would have been where the cattle and livestock were held before they were unloaded in Liverpool. The Irish got in the cattle stalls for the return trip. Such conditions enabled disease to spread rapidly. With many of the emigrants suffering from fever, combined with the cramped and unsanitary conditions on board, disease was rampant. Perhaps as many as 40 percent of steerage passengers died either en-route or immediately after their arrival. Only the slave ships of the previous century had worse conditions.35

35 Dolan, 38.
When and where John Stack disembarked in America I have never been able to ascertain, but my theory is that he landed in New York, as that is where the majority of immigrants landed in the 1840s. The harbor in New York had an advantage over Philadelphia, where the Delaware River was frozen for most of the winter. Another advantage was that the Erie Canal, Great Lakes and railroads enabled the newly arrived immigrants to travel to midwestern destinations relatively easily.\textsuperscript{36}

\textit{The Prairie State}

The Illinois prairie has soil of unusual fertility, many convenient water routes and an abundance of mineral resources that brought early settlers from diverse backgrounds in large numbers, over several routes into the Prairie State.

White men, who came as explorers to the prairies of Illinois, returned as settlers over 300 years ago. Flat and treeless, the prairie land was richer than European soil. “Here a man could provide his own food and clothing, and the ground could be plowed the day of arrival, without laboring ten years to cut and burn trees.”\textsuperscript{37}

“Only a fertile soil could produce the blue-stem prairie grass, tall and coarse bearded, often as high as a mounted horseman, that rippled a golden yellow in the late summer breeze. Massed on the prairie, giving a patchwork effect, were tall flowers of many colors, a vivid garden springing from a sod so matted and tough that for decades it protected much of the rich loam from the bite of the wood and iron plow”\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{36} Dolan, 81.


\textsuperscript{38} Howard, 2.
Forty-Two percent of Southern Illinois originally was covered by timber.\textsuperscript{39} For early explorers traveling by canoe, banks of timber hid the prairie even though the prairie covered most of Illinois and even ran along the shore of Lake Michigan for a few miles.

\textbf{Illinois History During French Control}

French explorers and missionaries were the first Europeans on record in Illinois. Father Marquette and Louis Jolliet paddled up the Illinois River in 1673, having first made a trip down the Mississippi. Father Marquette established the first permanent settlement, a mission, in 1675 near East St. Louis. Illinois was named by French explorers, the name meaning the land where the Illini Indians lived. The French intended to control and extend the lucrative fur trade in the region and in 1663 King Louis XIV sent soldiers to protect those interests.\textsuperscript{40}

\textbf{Illinois Path to Statehood}

Britain gained control of the Lower Great Lakes region in 1763 as a result of the French and Indian Wars, then lost it as a result of the American Revolution. A military expedition led by George Rogers Clark, defeated the English at forts in Illinois and western Indiana. Since Virginia had backed this expedition, Virginia claimed Illinois as a county in Virginia. Virginia realized that it couldn’t govern such a distant land and ceded it to the federal government in 1784. Illinois was now considered the Northwest Territory, under the Ordinance of 1787. Then


in 1800 Illinois became part of the Indiana Territory, finally becoming sovereign in 1809 and achieving statehood in 1818.\footnote{Biles, 24-28.}

**Early Pioneers in Illinois**

The Illinois Central Valley burgeoned with beaver, bear, fox, deer, marten and otter, creating a fur trade that became an economic mainstay that was maintained throughout most of Illinois during the early 1800’s. Early pioneers were of English, German, Scottish and Irish descent, coming from Eastern states, such as Kentucky, Georgia, Virginia and the Carolinas. They arrived on flatboats and barges with their belongings, finding a wealth of natural resources providing them the ability to live off the land. Along the rivers and the ravines leading to them, there were forests of hickory, oak, elm, walnut, locust, ash, cottonwood, hard or sugar trees, soft maple, wild cherry, red haws, black haws, persimmons and pawpaws, together with wild plums, crab apples, blackberries, raspberries, grapes, and gooseberries.\footnote{Charles Ballance. *The History of Peoria, Illinois* (Peoria: N.C. Nason, 1870) 82-84.}

The region that would become Peoria County centered on a village then known as Fort Clark, named after George Rogers Clark. When the county was organized in 1825, the village name was officially changed to Peoria. In 1835 Peoria was incorporated as a town, then in 1845 Peoria was incorporated as a city. The first construction to take place in Peoria was a courthouse and a jail.\footnote{“The Americans,” *Peoria Illinois History*, [http://peoria.com/community/history.php](http://peoria.com/community/history.php)(accessed March 21, 2012).}
As a result of the building of the Erie Canal in 1825, Illinois was opened up to an influx of settlers and merchants using the canal’s quicker and easier path to Illinois versus an overland route. The 1832 Black Hawk War ended skirmishes between Indians and newly arrived settlers over land possession, sending the Indians West of the Mississippi and resulting in bringing even more settlers into the region.

The Illinois prairies are some of the most fertile in the country, being drained by more than 275 rivers, with the majority flowing into the Mississippi and Ohio waterway system. Peoria sits on the bank of the largest river in the state, the Illinois. This extensive river system hastened early pioneers into the interior of the country and the settling of the prairies. Rich land, ample rainfall and a long growing season has made Illinois an important agricultural area.

**Beginning of the Industrial Age**

With the rise of the railroads in the 1850’s, industrial development rapidly spread throughout the state. As transportation by water and rail improved, western communities advanced in material prosperity, with Illinois in the lead. Completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 helped move products out of Illinois as it was also helping bring emigrants in. Illinois was then the very heart of the West, offering advantages to the famine-stricken Irishman and the oppressed Europeans. The construction of railways and public works of every description, the growing factories and the land rapidly increasing in value, offered opportunity for capital and labor.

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44 Biles, 59.

The granite-lined locks on the Illinois and Michigan Canal were put in place mainly by Irish laborers, many of whom immigrated to America specifically to work on the canal. Photo courtesy of Illinois Periodicals online.

**Coming to Peoria**

I still haven’t determined how and when John Stack arrived in the Illinois Central Valley, but feel pretty certain that he was following canal digging and/or railroad grading. He may also have seen a handbill distributed along his path extolling the virtues of the growth and opportunities to be had in the Prairie State.

The “North American Land and Emigration Company” had its agents in England and Ireland distributing literature describing the “wonderful opportunities” men would find in the frontier states. Thousands were directed annually from their homes beyond the Atlantic to the rich Prairie State. Agents for Illinois were Messrs. Ash and Diller of Springfield.
“The railroad construction boom fueled the need for workers, and the largest construction project, the Illinois Central, advertised in port cities New Orleans and New York, offering $1.25 a day and a transportation rate of $4.75 to procure workers. By the winter of 1852-53 6,000 to 8,000 laborers were on the Illinois Central’s payroll, the greatest number being Irish.” 46 The Illinois Central found that it was having a hard time meeting operating expenses and believed its success was dependent upon the surrounding regions being “developed sufficiently to furnish it with a large freight and passenger traffic and, in the meantime, it was dependent upon the income from it’s land sales.” 47 To this end, the Illinois Central began assisting the Illinois State Agricultural Society with its yearly fairs, by providing advertising about the advantages of settling in Illinois. To the farmers they gave free transportation for the cattle, stock and produce to the fair and provided visitors with reduced rates. It would appear it was worth the expense, judging by the amount of publicity that was generated. “Many of the agricultural weeklies and newspapers gave long descriptions of the fair, the excursion, and the crops and conditions in Illinois.” 48


48 Gates, 59.
The East and Western frontier were united in 1852 by rail when the Michigan Central reached Chicago. From this rapidly growing city, steel rails threaded every part of the state. Along these rails moved the commerce of the Mississippi Valley and emigrants made their way westward to transform the forests of Illinois into cornfields and the raw prairie into wheat fields.

John Stack was likely drawn to Peoria, at least in part, by employment opportunities there in the early 1850’s. Peoria was “...an ambitious American community” that had “...begun to develop a
manufacturing base of flour milling, pork packing and constructing farm implements.” 49 In 1863 I found John working in Reynolds and Co’s pork packing house in the city directory for that same year. 50 This rings true for me as Marie (Stack) Pankey also told me that John and his father had been butchers in Ireland, so he certainly would have been comfortable handling meat.

Peoria’s “ambitious” growth and immigrant attraction is evidenced by an almost trebling of the population in ten years: from 5,095 in 1850 to 14,045 in 1860.51 Records also document an active Irish immigrant community evidenced by church and Irish fraternal, self-help organizations’ records. 52

The Catholic Church in America during the 1840s was an immigrant church and played a central role in Irish-American community. Holding on to their Catholic roots was one of the most important aspects of Irish-American identity. Roman Catholic parishes spread by following the Irish laborers along canal and railroad route projects, helping to keep alive memories of a common origin and knit the community together. As land was bought along the routes, either with their wages or with script handed out to the laborers to buy land, the parish would be built within the developing villages. 53

1854 Local Politics and Religious Prejudice

The Kansas-Nebraska Act undid the work of half a century of compromise and concession about slavery directed toward the preservation of the Union. The act abrogated the Missouri Compromise and allowed slavery north of the previously observed demarcation line between slave and free states. The pro-Kansas-Nebraska group gave their allegiance to the Democratic party, but the anti-Kansas-Nebraska men had no common party affiliation. The Whig party had declined from national prominence to become significant only in local or state elections: a Free-Soiler party had arisen dedicated to opposition to the spread of slavery but it was short-lived and fractured. Meanwhile, Abolitionists had a stigma upon their name which was very hard to lose. While all of these elements were negotiating with each other for a common principle in which to unite and form a new party name, a Nativist political party known as the Know-Nothings suddenly grew up and for a time it seemed like all the elements might unite under their banner.  

Know-Nothing members subscribed to a general pledge against foreigners and Catholics. Membership in this party required a pledge to support all efforts to require a longer term of residence for foreigners before acquiring naturalization and to oppose the election of Roman Catholics to public office. Protestants nursed the belief that the Catholic church aspired to temporal power in the United States. Street preachers in nearly every large city tried to prejudice the public mind against Catholics. From 1851 to 1854 immigrants more than tripled from the

54 Lehrman, 171-174.

entire prior decade. That immigration growth drove a fear of the Irish and Catholics that spawned the Know-Nothings and spoke to Americans’ fears and prejudices and made religious unrest a constant of the era.

John Stack’s decision to move to Peoria placed him firmly amidst both the Nativist movement and the central American issue of the time: slavery and its extension through the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Even more, John Stack’s residence in Peoria allowed him to hear the issue argued in public debate by the act’s principal architect and legislative shepherd, Sen. Stephen Douglas, and the man who became the act’s most important and thoughtful critic, Abraham Lincoln. In a well-documented 1854 Peoria debate between Lincoln and Douglas that foreshadowed their famous senatorial debates several years later, Lincoln built the foundation of political belief that guided his attitudes and goals towards slavery for the balance of the antebellum period and his wartime presidency. It may be speculated that John Stack would have been torn between the two men and their arguments. On one hand, Stephen Douglas was a champion of the immigrant against the nativist Know-Nothing movement and as such a favorite of the Irish. On the other hand, slavery is inherently in conflict with free workingmen: how can a paid worker compete against an unpaid slave? After describing the debasing effect of slavery on white labor in the South, de Tocqueville stated the dilemma “...what would a poor immigrant do...if he were to land in a country where labor is stigmatized as degrading?” 56 Regardless of his leanings, he was indisputably awash in a maelstrom of the key issues of his time as championed by America’s foremost advocates. The excitement in the town was recorded in the local newspaper.

The attraction in town today was a debate in the court house square between the Hon. Abraham Lincoln, the distinguished orator of Central Illinois, and the Hon. Stephen A. Douglas, an authority on the “Kansas-Nebraska slavery bill.”

Judge Douglas received the biggest welcome of the visitors, being met three miles out of town by a procession of 500 Democrats in carriages and on horseback, led by Smith Frye and a brass band. Lincoln rode in on his horse.

Douglas spoke first and overran his allotted time. Lincoln was plainly at a disadvantage before the tiring crowd but made his remarks short and pertinent.

“I have always believed I could appreciate an argument,” he said, “and sometimes thought I could make one. But when a man denies the plainest facts in history you cannot argue with him - it is useless. The best you can do would be to stop his mouth with a corn cob.”

John married Winnifred O’Connor, a Famine orphan from County Mayo, in St. Mary’s Cathedral in Peoria, Illinois on 25 November, 1855, the first official record of him in Illinois. 57 On the

same day, another young Irish couple married in St. Mary’s Cathedral, Mary Hayes and Thomas McGowan. One wonders if the two couples knew each other and arranged their marriages on the same day.

Two weeks before John and Winnie married, The Peoria Daily Record stated on Nov. 10, 1855, “The streets of Peoria were illuminated by gas lights tonight for the first time and a great part of the population came out to see how the new lamps worked.” I can picture John and Winnie amid the crowd as the gas lights were lit and what a sight that must have been for them to behold. In an urban environment gas lights created many benefits, one being that of making the streets safer to be out at night. In the home, tallow candles were used more than anything else, but as time

58 Illinois Statewide Marriage Index Vol. II Page 26 Lic No 3336.
progressed stearine candles and lard oil lamps took their place.  

Draft Resistance in Illinois circa 1860s

The first draft law in the United States was passed during the Civil War. The idea of a draft law was collectively unpopular and brought about monumental resistance, including incidents of mob violence. Before the battle at Bull Run in July of 1861, enlistees from Illinois had responded to the President’s call for troops overwhelmingly. After the Union disaster at Bull Run the government realized increased troops would be needed, but volunteerism had slowed substantially.  

One obstacle to becoming a soldier, was a man leaving his family without any means of support, basically in poverty. As the war progressed and the cost of living rose, this problem grew

59 Ballance, 20.

worse.\textsuperscript{61} In the Spring of 1862, Illinois Governor Yates resorted to inducements as “promising to give officer status to recruits and financial aid to their families.” \textsuperscript{62} Still, enrollments were insufficient.

On July 17, 1862, President Lincoln signed into law the Militia Act, which called upon state militiamen to be pressed into service for nine months. Another call for 300,000 volunteers to serve nine months was issued on August 4, 1862 by the President. The draft riots in New York City, fueled in large part by Irish immigrant participation, further increased the spirit of defiance in the Prairie State. Then on March 3, 1863 the poorly constructed Militia Act was superseded by the nation’s first Conscription Act.\textsuperscript{63}

John Stack registered for the draft on July 1, 1863 from the Fifth Congressional District in Peoria. Although he registered, there is no evidence that he actually entered military service.\textsuperscript{64} I did find that Winnie’s brother Patrick O’Connor served in the 47th Illinois Infantry, surviving the experience. Also, a J. O’Connor from Pekin served as a private from April 25, 1861 and mustered out on July 25, 1861 in Company “F” 8th Illinois Infantry.\textsuperscript{65} I believe this to be John O’Connor.

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\textsuperscript{62} Sterling, 248.
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\textsuperscript{63} Sterling, 250.
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Setting Down Roots in Tazewell County

“To Tazewell county belongs the honor of having within her boundary the soil first turned by white men in the great State of Illinois”. Tazewell County was originally created from territory that was once part of Sangamon and Fayette counties in 1829. In 1830, McLean county was formed out of Tazewell by “taking off the three ranges east of the meridian and range one west of the meridian”. When the counties of Mason and Woodford were formed, Tazewell was reduced to it’s present boundaries.

John and Winnifred first appear on the 1860 Federal Census in Fondulac, Tazewell, although their name is misspelled and they are listed as “Stark”, instead of Stack. John states that he is 35 and Winnie that she is 25, both born in Ireland. Their daughter Mary is listed as a two year old and Margaret is listed as a one year old “male”. It is stated that the value of their real estate is $300.00. Close by, enumerated on the same census, are Winnie’s brother John O’Connor and his wife Margaret (Hayes) O’Connor and their children: Martin, Bridget, Thomas, John and Andrew. Near to John O’Connor and Margaret (Hayes) O’Connor I found Thomas Hayes and his wife Anne (Foley) Hayes and their children: Addie and Julia.

The Hayes and the Stack family’s history together dates back to Ireland. It is my belief that Thomas Hayes and Margaret (Hayes) O’Connor are brother and sister, and John Stack is their


cousin. Margaret (Hayes) O’Connor’s mother was a Stack, as testified by Thomas J. Scanlon, in the matter of the heirship of his cousin, Bartholomew J. Scanlon’s probate deposition in Peoria, June 18, 1938. Bartholomew J. Scanlon’s mother was Margaret (Stack) Scanlon. Margaret (O’Connor) Smith, granddaughter of Margaret (Hayes) O’Connor testified at the same time, also confirming that the mother of Margaret (Hayes) O’Connor was a Stack and that her grandmother, Margaret (Hayes) O’Connor and Margaret (Stack) Scanlon were first cousins. I have been tracking Margaret (Stack) Scanlon and her family for awhile now and recently acquired her death record which states her father was Bartholomew Stack. Her son, Bartholomew J. Scanlon is obviously named for him. Therefore, I surmise, Bartholomew Stack’s sister was mother to Margaret Hayes.

Tom Hayes, was listed as having have been born in the parish of Glin, County Limerick. This parish also has several O’Connor families. Furthermore, I believe that John Stack knew the Hayes’ family in Ireland. I don’t know who emigrated first, Tom Hayes or John Stack, perhaps they came together. In any event, their relationship spanned many years and their children continued it. In 1851, when John O’Connor and Margaret (Hayes) O’Connor arrived in America, they landed in New York, and arrived in Central Illinois pretty soon thereafter. It may be speculated that they were following Margaret’s brother, Tom Hayes. I believe that John Stack met Winnifred O’Connor through his cousin Margaret (Hayes) O’Connor, as she was married to Winnie’s brother, John.
A copy of a letter written in 1909 to Edward J. Hayes, Thomas and Anne Foley Hayes’ first born son, from John and Winnie’s first born son, my great-grandfather, James Thomas Stack, begins with the salutation “Hi Cousin”. It is pretty faded but the gist of the letter is that James is inquiring as to the health of Edward’s family as he heard they were quarantined with small pox. Then he goes on to write that he will be going by Ed’s place next Monday about noon, he’s shipping ninety head of cattle to Chicago and taking all the boys along. James also states that he sold his land for $16,000.00, then bought two hundred and forty acres situated 3 1/2 miles north of Shelton and 23 miles west of Grand Island. He purchased this land for $80.00 an acre. One hundred of the acres were in “fine alfalfa”. Both of these land parcels are in Nebraska.

The Hayes family migrated into the Nebraska territory and I believe James Thomas Stack followed or accompanied them. My great-grandfather James Thomas Stack, whom my father is named for, is the only child of John and Winnie’s to leave Illinois permanently. When I went back to Illinois in 2010, the Illinois Stack family didn’t know anything about James Thomas Stack’s line as a result of his leaving Illinois, so I was able to provide the missing information and link the family back together.

Money was little known and rarely seen among early settlers. As John and Winnifred were on their own farm by 1860 in Fond du Lac, Tazewell County, they might have participated in the bartering system using their surplus farm commodities. For taxes and postage only money would have been allowed. Consequently, with limited cash, one may surmise they posted very few letters.
Mary Stack was John and Winnifred’s first born; her baptism took place at St. Joseph’s Catholic Church in Peoria, Illinois on 12 Feb 1857. Her sponsors were Edward and Mary Connor. Mary Stack was named after John’s mother, Mary Murphy.

Margaret Stack was born 10 June 1859. She was named after Winnifred’s mother, Margaret Muldowney.

James Thomas Stack was born 11 Sept 1861 and baptized at St. Mary’s Cathedral in Peoria on 21 Sept 1861. He was named after John’s father, James Stack. I don’t know if the elder James also had Thomas in his name or not.

Anne E. was born 3 Oct 1863 in Peoria and baptized at St. Mary’s Cathedral on 4 Oct 1863. I don’t know who, if anyone, she was named after. Traditional naming patterns would have had Anne being named after her mother, Winnifred, but she might have been named for John Stack’s mothers eldest sister.

John S. was born 18 Dec 1864. He was probably named after his father.

Bartholomew Matthew “Batt” Stack was born 3 April 1868. Batt was probably named after John’s brother Matthew Stack, who was a poet and may have come with John to America in 1841. I don’t know where the name Bartholomew came from. His baptismal record from St.

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69 From St. Martin de Porres sacrament records. Peoria, Illinois.
Patrick’s Church in Peoria, Illinois states that he was baptized 7 June 1868. His sponsors were Roger Hayes and Bridget O’Connor.

Winifred Bernice Stack was born 16 Sept 1870. She was the first child to be born out of Peoria, but was baptized 2 Oct 1870 at St. Patrick’s Church in Peoria. Her sponsors were Michael Stack and Julia Hayes.

I continue to find discrepancies in dates and ages, but where I have listed sponsors or churches, these dates were taken directly from sacramental records of said churches and so I believe would be the most accurate.

Edward Stack was born 4 Aug 1873 in Gridley Township, McLean County, Illinois and died in the following spring, 19 April 1874. I don’t know for whom Edward was named.

Martin Andrew Stack was born 31 March 1875 in Gridley Township, McLean County, Illinois. I believe he was named after Winnifred’s father, Martin O’Connor and Winnifred’s maternal grandfather, Andrew Muldowney.

William Stack was born 2 Oct 1877, also in Gridley Township, on the Stack farm. Again, who he was named after has eluded discovery.

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70 From St. Mary’s Church sacrament records, El Paso, Woodford, Illinois.
John Stack is listed as a laborer, living on Adams in the 1858 Peoria city directory, then in the 1863 city directory of Peoria, John Stack is listed as a laborer at Reynolds & Company pork-packing house; res. 500 South Madison. I surmise that John is holding down two jobs now: one in the pork manufacturing plant in Peoria and the other farming in Tazewell County. The supply of hogs declined following wartime demands, so John might have been let go for lack of work, or he simply put more effort into his farm. 71 Whatever the reason, he doesn’t show up again in Reynolds & Co.

While living in Tazewell county, John and Winnie would have had to row, use a ferry or cross the “Old Wagon and Foot Bridge” that spans the Illinois River into Peoria for church services, baptisms, marriages, funerals, shopping and visiting family and friends. The bridge was built in 1848 and would be in use for sixty years. This bridge appears to have been a toll bridge as the newspaper refers to Samuel Tart as the busiest man in the city these days as he is in charge of the bridge tolls and “the throng that passes over each day would people a small city.” 72 Mary and Margaret were both born in Peoria, but the next four children: James, Annie, John and Batt, were born in East Peoria, Tazewell county. I believe John and Winnie left Peoria and moved across the river into Tazewell county as a means of saving money since east of the river was a cheaper place to live. Either their family members, the Hayes and O’Connors, followed them or they followed their family members.


On the 1870 Federal Census the Stack family is still in Fondulac and the value of their real estate is valued at $1,000.00. John states he is 48 years old and Winnie is 33 years old. On the 1870 Federal Census John states that he can read and write, Winnie says that she can read but not write.

Margaret (Hayes) O’Connor is still living nearby, but she is now a widow. Her husband, John O’Connor had disappeared on Thanksgiving day, 28 Nov 1861. There were several newspaper accounts, and rewards offered for information about his disappearance.

“Residing on the other side of the river, mysteriously John O’Connor disappeared last week. He was last seen on Thanksgiving Evening, leaving the grocery store of James O’Connor. There has been no clue yet as to the mysterious disappearance of John O’Connor. A number have men have been questioned by the police.”

One woman stated that another man told her John O’Connor had been beaten to death and buried under the stairs of James O’Connor’s house, but nothing was found when searched by the police. Then an article appears in the newspaper stating,

“John O’Connor who mysteriously disappeared several months ago was yesterday found floating in the river opposite Moss, Bradley and Co’s Distillery. The Coroner’s jury returned a verdict of death from unknown causes”.

There appears to be a great deal of mystery and intrigue surrounding John’s disappearance and death, but the truth is known only by those who harmed him. He is buried in the O’Connor family plot in Peoria at St. Mary’s Cemetery.

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74 Peoria Daily Transcript, Dec. 4, 1861.

As a result of John O’Connor’s death, his wife and family found themselves in dire financial circumstances. The estate was insolvent and had a debt of $362.00. All Margaret had at her disposal at the time to raise money was her land. On October 11, 1862, Margaret (Hayes) O’Connor entered into a land transaction with her brother-in-law, John Stack. John purchased 23 acres from her for $362.00. This same piece of property must have been given back to the O’Connor children at some point, as they sell it to a John Taenties, October 2, 1885. Margaret moves into Peoria and lives at 706 McBean Street until her death in 1883. On Dec. 12, 1882 Margaret buys a plot at St. Mary’s Cemetery in Peoria for the sum of $25.00, plus a maintenance fee of $90.00. Margaret dies on 16 June 1883. She rests with her husband John in the O’Connor plot in Peoria at St. Mary’s Cemetery.

Again, closely enumerated to Margaret (Hayes) O’Connor on the 1870 census is Thomas Hayes and Anne (Foley) Hayes. While searching for John and Winnifred on the 1870 census, I discovered another of Winnie’s brothers, Patrick O’Connor. The six Stack children are enumerated in Patrick’s household in Peoria, along with his children and wife, Mary Kelly Stack, whom he married in Peoria on Sept 11, 1858. This brother of Winnie’s also came to an untimely demise. He was struck by a train, engine no. 11 on C. B Railroad, while walking on the track, 4 April 1887. On the 1870 census Patrick states that he cannot read or write. I have recently learned that Patrick O’Connor had lost his hearing as a result of serving in the Civil War.

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76 Record retrieved from the Tazewell County Court Recorder, Pekin, Tazewell, Illinois.
77 From the records of the Diocese in Peoria, Peoria, Illinois.
79 Physician’s Certificate of Death, State Board of Health Peoria County Clerk’s office.
so would not have been able to hear the train approaching that killed him. I believe that John and Winnie left their children in Patrick and Mary’s care while they went east to El Paso, Woodford County to visit Winnie’s sister Hannorah O’Connor Priest and perhaps, look for a new parcel of land to buy. Winnie Stack gave birth to her seventh child, a daughter named, Winnifred Bernice Stack, born 9 Sept 1870 El Paso, Woodford County, most likely at her sister’s home.

During the 1860’s farming took on a whole new dimension. John saw during this time many improvements and inventions; “the reaper was perfected, improved corn planters were devised, the plow was adapted to efficient prairie farming, and the corn cutter and stacker, the power shellers, the circular harrow, the cultivator and the ditching machine were either introduced or improved upon.” ⁸⁰ It’s highly probable that John would not have had many of these new farming implements, but he certainly would have been aware of them, as McLean County had 21 large scale farms at the time John Stack came into the area.

January 9, 1871, John and Winnie sold their farm in Fondulac, Tazewell, Illinois to one John Dray. One may wonder where the family was between selling in January and then relocating into McLean County nine months later. On 10 October 1871, John Stack signed the papers, giving him ownership of 40 and 17/100 acres in the Gridley township area, of McLean County, Illinois for the sum of $1205.10. He purchased this land from one Philip H. and Mary H. Tompkins of El Paso, Woodford County, Illinois. The legal description of the land is as follows:

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Moving into McLean County

In 1879, McLean County was the largest county in the state. Being situated in the central portion of Illinois, it was free from the harsh winters of the North and also the severe summer heat experienced in some of the southern counties. About one-ninth of its surface is covered with groves, “protecting its prairies from the rough visitations of violent winds, and furnishing grateful shade and shelter to stock in the changing seasons.”  

In 1830, McLean County was created out of a re-adjustment of Tazewell County and Vermillion County. In 1839, De Witt County was created, taking 4 2/5 townships from the south end of McLean; and in 1841, Woodford County was created, taking, in a zigzag direction, from west to northeast abut 9

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81 author unknown, *History of McLean County* (Chicago: W. Le Baron, Jr. 1879), 189.
townships from northwest corner of McLean and reducing it to its present shape and dimensions.\textsuperscript{82}

Some intended for the prairie for free grazing of cattle, not farmed and fenced, but with the arrival of the Illinois Central Railroad, land was purchased and cultivated very quickly in townships such as Gridley. The primary crop was, and still is, corn, but wheat and oats also flourished for a time, allowing land to be paid off by a first crop of wheat. I posed the question as to what John Stack might have farmed and got an answer from Joe Hayes, who stated “that every farmer had horses, cows (at least two milk cows for their own use and some had more cows so they could sell the milk to the dairy), chickens and pigs. Some farmers might have had a few sheep, but not many. They raised corn, oats and alfalfa (for straw). Alfalfa followed the oats in the rotation of crops. Sometimes, part of the alfalfa was plowed under for nourishment of the ground.” \textsuperscript{83}

On the 1880 Federal census, the John Stack family is in Gridley township, McLean Co, Illinois.\textsuperscript{84} Their name is now listed on the census as “Stuck”. In the household are: Maggie, James, Anna, John, Batt, Winnie, Martin, and Willie. Mary Stack did not show up on the 1880 census, she had already died. Her date of death was 9 Oct 1879. She most likely died at home on the Stack farm, from complications accompanying consumption. She is buried at St. Mary’s Cemetery in El Paso, Woodford County, Illinois. There was another son, Edward, born in 1873, living only 8 months, appearing on no census, also buried at St. Mary’s. John and Winnifred, along with all of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[82] W. Le Baron, Jr., 194.
\item[83] Joe Hayes, a descendant of Cornelius Hayes and cousin to the Stack’s.
\end{footnotes}
their children are buried at St. Mary’s cemetery, except Batt Stack, who is buried at Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Chicago, along side of his first wife, Julia Bonner, and James Thomas Stack, who is buried in Wood River, Hall, Nebraska.

The 1880 Gridley township, McLean, Illinois Federal census stated that John and Winifred were 51 and 45 years old, respectively. If John was 51, then he must have been born in 1829, not 1824 as his obituary stated. The 1900 federal census lists Winnifred’s date of birth as Sept 1841, but if she was 45 on the 1880 federal census, then her year of birth would be 1834. Furthermore, if she was born 1841, then when she married John in 1855, she would have been 14 years old, which seems unlikely to me, but impossible to rule out given the much younger marrying age of women then.

It is my belief that on the earliest census the information would be the most correct. John was born circa 1825 and Winnie circa 1835.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census information re ages:</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Winnifred</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>48</td>
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<td>1880</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>1900</td>
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Gridley township is a couple of miles East of El Paso, Woodford County. This is where Winnifred and John lived, farmed, raised their family, educated their children, entertained their family, friends and neighbors, worshipped, buried two children and where John Stack died. John died 13 Feb 1899 at home with all his children around him, save James Thomas who was traveling from Nebraska to be there.

John Stack became a naturalized citizen. He filed his declaration of intent to become a citizen on 11 Feb 1868 in Peoria County in Illinois. On 19 April 1880, he became a citizen of the
United States at the McLean County courthouse as witnessed by John Butler and John Kelly. The relationship of these men to John Stack is unknown, but knowing how tribal the Irish are, it is highly likely they had a family relationship.

In John Stack’s will, he stated that his daughter Winifred B. Stack shall act as his executrix and should rent out his farm and 77 acres, indicating that John bought 33 more acres at some point. While his wife was still alive, he directed the executrix to pay her 200 dollars a year for her expenses. If she remarried she should then only get 100 dollars per year.

His chattel property consisted of:

1200 Bushels of corn in crib            300.00
200 bushels oats in granary            40.00
2 horses, 6 years old                  125.00
1 Cow                                   30.00
6 head of hogs                         60.00
1 buggy                                10.00
1 wagon                                5.00
1 plow                                 1.00
1 cultivator                          2.00
1 harrow                              1.00
1 corn planter                        3.00
2 ton hay in stock                     12.00

Household and Kitchen furniture         50.00

Land                                   6500.00
At the time of his death, John still had a $2500.00 mortgage on his place, taxes of $23.15 were owed and any and all assorted debt was itemized. When John’s estate had cleared probate, Winnifred was already dead, the farm was sold on 8 Aug 1900 for $8082.50. John Stack and Winifred (O’Connor) Stack’s heirs each received $686.71 on 1 March 1901.

Winnifred died 16 June 1900 in Peoria. Before Winnifred died, she had gone to Harvard, Nebraska to visit her son James. Later, she visited her sister Allise O’Connor Crimmins in Galesburg, Knox, Illinois. Her other sister Hannorah (Norah) had died in 1891, in Nebraska. I have no idea if she ever saw Norah again, once Norah and her family left Peoria for Gage County, Nebraska. Winnie lived for a short time in Chicago, with daughter, Annie, and her two sons, Batt and William, then went to visit her oldest daughter Margaret Keenan, at her home in Peoria. She took ill and died at her daughter’s home.

I have thought of my great-great-grandfather, John Stack, many times over the years, wondering what he might have thought and felt about the life he left behind in Ireland and the one he made for himself in America. At night, as he lay in bed, did his mind wander back across the Atlantic to the hills of Kerry? Can any man in an adopted land forget the land of his birth and childhood? Every stone, brook, hill and river must have been as clear in his eyes as when he was there. Did he ever imagine he would one day see Kerry again?

I like to envision him as a pleasant and good natured man, full of kindness and warmth, affable as only the Irish can be, and generous, but mentally and physically toughened by the pain and
suffering he had to bear as a young man in Ireland and in America. I hope that he took all to be
his neighbor in his newly adopted country and that he died in peace with implicit faith in his
God. A portion of his life - from his Irish departure to his Peoria arrival - are enveloped in
obscurity. Subsequent to his Peoria arrival he can be traced through the years by the trail he left
behind as he forged a new life; a family patriarch’s life that required great effort, perseverance
and diligence. Arriving virtually penniless in an alien land, he became a land owner, saw his
children go to school and get an education, and his family became American all due to his
persistence and hard work. I would not exist were it not for the resilience and courage of both he
and Winnie. The Irish historical record and family lore leads to a reasonable inference that
having endured much pain and suffering in Ireland, they were wounded souls when they arrived
in America. No words can express my most humble gratitude to all of my ancestors.

Conclusion

John Stack’s immigration to America followed a script well known and oft repeated in the story
of nineteenth century American immigration. Suffering from terrible poverty and religious
oppression, stuck in a rigidly hierarchical social system without the ability to acquire land or the
likelihood of advancement in station, John was ripe for the lure of the American promise. The
ability to own land, practice one’s chosen faith, make a place in society based on one’s own
efforts and abilities pulled immigrants from all over the Old World to the New. John Stack was
one small part of that massive movement personifying it not in every specific detail, but rather
tracking its overall arc of migration to a land of promise, hope, and relative freedom.